



1973

William James and the Rationality of Religious Experience

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Recommended Citation

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WILLIAM JAMES
AND THE
RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

May, 1973

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CHAPTER I

WILLIAM JAMES: INFLUENCES UPON HIS LIFE AND WORK

William James was born on January 11, 1842, in New York City, thus beginning a full and complex life which was to pull together in his person many influences of his time and set loose many more for the time to come. His thought and writings grew out of his personal and often painful search for truth and meaning and were a blend of his family background, his own interests and studies, and the intellectual milieu of his time. These influences combined to make the religious question perhaps the basic issue of his life.

The purpose of this study is to focus on the religious question, beginning with a biography of James and moving in the second chapter to his foundations for belief. Over against his scientific background was his struggle with the possibility of going beyond strictly scientific findings, of believing "beyond the evidence." In justifying belief in hypotheses that go beyond particular sciences and embrace a more all-encompassing world view, he developed his understanding of rationality, his "sentiment of rationality," including much more than pure reason.

This consideration of his justification of belief in general will lead, in the third chapter, to an evaluation of the religious hypothesis in particular, from the viewpoint of the rationality of individual religious experiences. An examination of The Varieties of Religious Experience will reveal his conviction that religious experience is not

something irrational, to be tolerated in those who have not yet outgrown its need. And yet it is not rational either, in the sense of a strictly logical and theoretical rationality. Rather, religious experience produces the "sentiment of rationality" that touches both theoretical and practical reason, the entire human person.

Family influence upon William James begins already with his grandfather William, the first of the James family to come to this country from Ireland in 1789. He settled in Albany, New York, where his ambition and business ability amassed an estate worth three million dollars, guaranteeing the economic security of his children and grandchildren and making possible the widespread traveling that was to be an essential part of William's education. But the elder William James had also hoped to transmit his Calvinistic puritanism to his children and grandchildren. His son Henry and his grandson William each reacted against this Calvinism in his own way, and in time worked out his own religious stance. But in them as in other members of the family, the religious conflict contributed to serious mental disorders, as much an inheritance from the elder William as his financial estate.¹

William's father, Henry Senior, began already as a child to rebel against the God of Calvinism who, he was taught, hated and scowled upon all the simple joys of nature which were so exhilarating for the young boy. He continued to pursue this love of the outdoors, with an uneasiness about its effect on his salvation, until a tragic accident cost him

¹Edward Carter Moore, William James (New York: Washington Square Press, 1965), 3-7.

his leg. As a thirteen-year-old school boy helping to put out a fire caused by an experiment, he was severely burned, resulting in two amputations above the knee.²

His physical movement was now restricted, but he was still very much alive to the pleasures of his day, and a cause of concern to his Calvinistic father. "His worldly interests and animal spirits were at war with his humanity, and both were at war with his traditional piety."³ He moved restlessly to various occupations, studied for a time for the ministry, and finally set out upon a lifetime effort to develop and articulate his own religious thought. His restlessness was geographical as well as intellectual, and even his marriage and the birth of his first son, William, did not keep him from moving back and forth between Albany and New York City.⁴

Along with the task of spreading his religious views, Henry Senior undertook the education of his children. He had little faith in schools, and wanting to prevent the lives of his children from being isolated and stagnant, he transferred them to several places, including England, France, and Switzerland for their education. His interest always was to develop their talents with the greatest amount of freedom possible. From this restless interest of his father in his education, William acquired a knowledge of French and German and an experience of museums, theaters,

²Gay Wilson Allen, William James (New York: Viking Press, 1967), 6-7

³Ralph Barton Perry, The Thought and Character of William James: Briefer Version (New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper and Row, 1964), p. 6.

⁴Allen, William James, p. 10.

and people as well as schools in Europe.⁵

The restless search for new experiences and situations, then, was part of the inheritance passed on to William by his father, along with an intense interest in the place of man in this world and a genuine religious sensitivity and concern.⁶ William would not come to share the particular religious views of his father, but he would share the search for religious insight into man, his world, and his God.

It was an already well-traveled William James, then, who returned from Europe with his family in 1860 and settled in Newport, where he began to study painting in the studio of Morris Hunt. He had been sketching and drawing while in Europe, as well as admiring works of art, and he wanted to test his interest in painting as a career.⁷ Although he abandoned the idea within a year, his interest in art had been genuine and left traces on his later philosophical stance. Even as a philosopher he retained an artistic mind with its interest in the concrete, particular, and individual, and an impatience with abstractions.⁸

His search for a career then brought him in 1861 to Harvard. He was already well acquainted with the intellectual movements of his time. Emerson in fact had been a frequent visitor to the James residence as

⁵Bernard P. Brennan, William James (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), 24-26.

⁶John J. McDermott, ed., The Writings of William James (New York: Random House, 1967), xix.

⁷Brennan, William James, 26-7.

⁸Allen, William James, p. 497.

William was growing up, and through Emerson he met Thoreau. But James was not attracted to the transcendental movement, finding its separation from real life to lead to futility. Harvard at that time was a center for literary celebrities as well, but it was science that James had chosen to study, building upon an interest he had had from boyhood in observation and the use of instruments.

His scientific studies revealed a basic quality of his mind, his eager but impatient search for knowledge. He could not stay long with the same task, partly because of poor health but partly because the "power of his mind lay largely in its extreme mobility, its darting, exploratory impulsiveness. It was not a mind which remained stationary . . . but a mind which traveled widely--now here and now there--seeing all things for itself."⁹

James began his scientific studies with chemistry, but his teacher, Charles William Elliot, was soon to notice his frequent "unsystematic excursions" into other sciences and areas of thought. From chemistry he moved to the study of comparative anatomy and physiology, being particularly impressed with his teacher, Jeffries Wyman, and his devotion to truth, his disinterestedness, accuracy, and thoroughness.¹⁰ It was through Wyman that James became interested in evolution, a view he would eventually have to reconcile with his religious interest. His studies next brought him to biology, leading in 1865 to a one-year

⁹Perry, The Thought and Character of William James: Briefer Version, p.66.

¹⁰Ibid., 66-7.

expedition to Brazil with Louis Agassiz to collect specimens of marine animals for the new Agassiz Museum. But in the meantime, in 1864, James had entered still another area by beginning studies in the Medical School. Throughout this time, while his mind was wandering restlessly through chemistry, comparative anatomy, biology, to medicine, it traveled as well through the whole field of literature, history, and philosophy.¹¹ In addition to reading widely in areas other than science, he kept up an interest in philosophy especially through discussions with friends, among them Charles Peirce, Chauncy Wright, Wendell Holmes, and Thomas Ward. As all four were disposed toward naturalism or scepticism, the contact provided James with a contrast to the strong religious emphasis of his father.¹²

In April of 1867 James again interrupted his medical studies and sailed for Europe. His health had not been good, plagued as he was with insomnia, trouble with his stomach, eyes, and back, and at times deep depression, all of which contributed to his already natural restlessness and limited the amount of reading and research he could do. Also, he had become interested in experimental physiology at the Medical School, and he hoped by going to Germany to pursue that interest and perfect his knowledge of German.¹³ He returned to America in November, 1868, continued his medical studies at Harvard, and passed his medical exam on June 21, 1869.

¹¹Ibid., p. 71.

¹²Ibid., p. 78.

¹³Ibid., p. 79.

In April, 1870, William James underwent a spiritual crisis which was to be a turning point in his life. His spirits had been low for many reasons, including again his poor health, but the real basis for the crisis was "the ebbing of the will to live, for lack of a philosophy to live by--a paralysis of action occasioned by a sense of moral impotence."¹⁴ James had studied science for several years, and he was well acquainted with the materialists and determinists of his time and their reduction of emotional and mental processes to the blind operation of mechanical forces.¹⁵ But he could not accept the "iron block" universe of the determinists, nor what appeared to be the closed systems of Kant, Hegel, Leibniz, and much of the philosophical tradition, in which all the parts are so formed that all future conditions and combinations are settled. He needed a universe where man was not morally impotent, but rather could make a difference by his choices and his actions. It was especially by reading Charles Renouvier whom he had met in France that he was now able to save himself from despair and possible suicide by deliberately choosing to believe in free will:¹⁶

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second Essais and see no reason why his definition of free will--"the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts"--need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume

¹⁴Ibid., p. 120.

¹⁵Allen, William James, p. 501.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 498.

for the present--until next year--that it is no illusion.
My first act of free will shall be to believe in free
will.¹⁷

This personal crisis was also important for James in his life as a philosopher. That the crisis could only be relieved by a philosophical insight indicates what was to be the role of philosophy in his life. Philosophy for James would always be an intensely personal search, always a part of life and living, never pure theory. His gradual and painful resolution of this crisis also indicated the type of philosophy that would draw him on. He could not ignore evil, nor tolerate it, nor accept it as inevitable. "No philosophy could possibly suit him that did not candidly recognize the dubious fortunes of mankind, and encourage him as a moral individual to buckle on his armor and go forth to battle."¹⁸

Once he had rejected suicide and freely chosen the possibility of a creative life and a world open to man's activity, his career of teaching and writing would be a search to discover the truth of this belief. In August, 1872, he became an instructor in physiology at Harvard, where he was to move to psychology and eventually philosophy. All of his studies during this period were interrelated and influenced his approach. His work in medicine, anatomy, and physiology, for example, would not let him be satisfied with the current approach to psychology, stressing the soul and ignoring the body.¹⁹ He felt a need in his psychology for a more experimental and scientific approach.

¹⁷Perry, The Thought and Character of William James: Briefer Version, p. 121.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 122

¹⁹Brennan, William James, p. 39.

At the same time he was very interested in evolution and its contributions to science as well as its challenge to religion. His studies had been strongly scientific, and yet his background had been strongly religious. His own personal crisis convinced him of the need to move beyond purely scientific evidence, while remaining faithful to its findings, and working out this delicate balance would engage his energies for years to come. Above all, James brought to his teaching and writing the same restlessness of mind that had characterized his years of study. "James's own character and temperament needed change, novelty, and freedom for healthy existence, and his own experience had convinced him that he lived in a world in which they could and should operate."²⁰

James's development as a philosopher, therefore, was closely tied to his personal life. He reflected on his own experience, and attempted to provide philosophical understanding of that experience. His professional training was not in philosophy, however, and at times he appears weak on what other philosophers had written. At times too he uses terms such as "truth" ambiguously, sometimes with the connotations these terms have acquired in the history of philosophy, sometimes with new meanings he has given them.

In July, 1878, James married Alice Gibbens, who contributed greatly to his happiness and the success of his career. Her interest, sympathy, and concern helped him through the years of intense activity intermingled with poor health, balancing with her composure his high-strung

²⁰ Allen, William James, p. 516.

mobility and restlessness.²¹ With her help he was able to pursue a career of teaching, writing, and lecturing, searching relentlessly for insights into man and his relation to his world, and sharing these insights with students, colleagues, and friends with his own mixture of clarity, depth, charm, and humor.

²¹Perry, The Thought and Character of William James: Briefer Version, p. 145.

CHAPTER II

FOUNDATIONS: THE RATIONALITY OF BELIEF

William James's restless mind and his need for novelty would hardly have been satisfied with the findings of science alone or the workings of pure and abstract reason. Furthermore, his personal crisis of 1870 convinced him of the need to choose beyond the scientific evidence in order to find a reason to live. In several lectures given between 1880 and 1896 he worked out his "belief in belief," his justification for the conviction that at times it was permissible and even necessary to go beyond scientific evidence, to believe and act accordingly rather than waiting for all the evidence to appear and convince the mind. In 1897 he collected these and other essays in The Will to Believe. In the preface he mentioned the first four essays as being "largely concerned with defending the legitimacy of religious faith."¹ These will be the focus of our attention.

The title essay, "The Will to Believe," provides us above all with a description of the role belief in general actually plays in our lives. Beginning with a definition of terms, James points out that an hypothesis is anything that may be proposed to our belief, and may be either live or dead. "A live hypothesis is one that appeals as a real

¹William James, The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), p. x

possibility to him to whom it is proposed,"² the deadness and liveness being relative to the individual thinker and measured by his willingness to act upon the hypothesis. The decision between two hypotheses is an option. Options in turn may be living or dead, forced or avoidable, momentous or trivial. A living option is one in which both hypotheses are live, such as "Be an agnostic or be a Christian," both of which would be understandable and possible for us to act upon. A forced option would be a choice based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing--e.g., "Either accept this truth or go without it." "Either love me or hate me" would not be a forced option, as a person could avoid that choice by remaining indifferent. A momentous option is one which involves a unique opportunity, a significant investment, and an irreversible decision. A genuine option, in James's terms, will then be an option that is living, forced, and momentous.³

Against this background James considers "the actual psychology of human opinion," how we form our convictions and the role in the process of our "passional and volitional nature" on the one hand and our intellect on the other. It is important to note here that James does not use the term "nature" in the technical sense in which it has been used in the history of philosophy. It does not refer to any kind of clearly defined and distinct faculty or source of operations in a sub-

²Ibid., p. 2.

³Ibid., 2-4.

stantive sense. In some ways, James continues, it seems "simply silly" to talk of "believing by our volition," as if our will could either help or hinder our intellect in its perceptions of truth. "Can we, by any effort of our will, or by any strength of wish that it were true, believe ourselves well and about when we are roaring with rheumatism in bed?"⁴ Furthermore, allowing our passional and volitional nature into the picture seems vile as well as silly when we consider "the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences," built upon the lives of men who remained disinterested and impersonal, not yielding to preference or sentiment or their "passional nature," but submitting "to the icy laws of outer fact."⁵ From this point of view, then, it would seem that as we form our convictions and opinions, wishing and willing are merely "fifth wheels to the coach."⁶

And yet, if we would then assume that pure reason alone is what settles our opinions, we would "fly quite as directly in the teeth of the facts." It is true that our willing nature cannot bring back to life hypotheses that are already dead for us. But what has made them dead for us is usually a previous action of our willing nature of an antagonistic kind. "Willing nature" for James includes "all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set."⁷ And all these factors,

⁴Ibid., p. 5.

⁵Ibid., p. 7.

⁶Ibid., p. 8.

⁷Ibid., p. 9.

he maintains, have an influence upon which hypotheses we in fact consider alive and which dead.

Very often indeed we accept opinions because of their prestige more than their inner clearness, and our reason is often satisfied "if it can find a few arguments that will do to recite in case our credulity is criticised by someone else."⁸ Even our belief in truth itself, our conviction that there is such a thing as truth and our minds are made for it, is affected by our willing nature. We want to believe that our experiments and studies bring us closer to the truth and we agree to proceed accordingly. But if a sceptic asks us how we know there is such a thing as truth, we cannot prove it logically. It is just one volition against another. Finally, we tend to disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use. Huxley, for example, has no use for bishops and sacerdotalism in his life and therefore disbelieves, while Newman finds a need for the same priestly system and "finds all sorts of reasons good for staying there."⁹

It seems clear, then, that non-intellectual forces influence our convictions. In the actual psychology of human opinion, the way in which our convictions are in fact formed, pure insight and logic do not play the only role. But is this actual situation also pathological and reprehensible, or is it to be accepted as normal? This brings us to the thesis of the essay:

⁸Ibid., p. 9.

⁹Ibid., p. 10.

Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passionate decision, --just like deciding yes or no,¹⁰ and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.

In doing "a bit more of preliminary work" before tackling the thesis, James points out that he is consciously rejecting scepticism and notes the two ways we can hold that our minds can indeed find truth. The absolutists claim that they can know the truth and know for certain that they know it, while the empiricists maintain that although they may attain truth they cannot infallibly know when.¹¹ James rejects the objective certitude of the absolutists and denies that the intellect has any infallible signal for knowing when it has the truth. This does not mean that the empiricist gives up the quest for truth. He still believes that he gains "an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think."¹² But rather than expecting to know for certain that an hypothesis is true, he says that "if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true."¹³

James then states the two great commandments for would-be knowers: "We must know the truth; and we must avoid error."¹⁴ But, he points out, these are two separable laws, and our emphasis on one or the other colors

¹⁰Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹Ibid., p. 12.

¹²Ibid., p. 17

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

our whole intellectual life. Our primary concern may be to avoid error at all costs, and never risk belief on insufficient evidence, or we may feel that approaching real knowledge is worth the risk of sometimes being in error. But again, the choice between the two attitudes is not decided on strictly logical grounds but on the basis of our "passional life." James, who had already indicated that empiricism was his approach, also comes down on the side of an active search for truth, being willing to live with the risk of error.

Against this background of the actual influence of our passional nature, James continues his discussion of the legitimacy of this situation. He grants that at times it is best to wait for more evidence and not risk error, especially in scientific questions, which really are trivial options for us spectators. We are not so much in need, for example, of a theory of the Rontgen rays that we must decide one way or the other before the evidence is in. The same is not true for the scientist himself, however, who is not just a spectator, no matter how impersonal and objective he may think he is. While he must remain true to the facts, the investigation is helped along if he has a "passionate" desire to get his own faith confirmed. "If you want an absolute duffer in an investigation, you must, after all, take the man who has no interest whatever in its results."¹⁵

But, asks James, are there not sometimes forced options, times when we must decide without waiting for more evidence, especially if our

¹⁵Ibid., p. 21.

main interest is to gain truth and not just avoid error? Moral questions in particular come to mind as questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof. "Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the worths, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart."¹⁶ In moral questions there is no chance of waiting for scientific evidence, as there is no scientific evidence to wait for. Even to decide whether to have or not have moral beliefs is done by our will.

Moral scepticism can no more be refuted or proved by logic than intellectual scepticism can. When we stick to it that there is truth (be it of either kind), we do so with our whole nature, and resolve to stand or fall by the results.¹⁷

Furthermore, in some questions, such as those regarding personal relations, waiting for the evidence may be self-defeating. If I am wondering whether you like me, the result may depend on my assuming it and meeting you half way.

The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, . . . ten to one your liking never comes.¹⁸

There can be times, then, when faith in something helps bring it about. James concludes, "In truths dependent on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing."¹⁹

¹⁶Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁸Ibid., 23-4.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 25.

Therefore, what James provides us in the first part of the essay is a psychology of human opinion, a description of how we actually form our convictions, emphasizing that non-intellectual forces do have a place, even in the supposedly "passionless" sphere of science. Logical reasoning alone cannot decide the options that determine our stance toward the world: scepticism, or the ability to know truth; absolutism or empiricism; an emphasis on seeking truth, or trying above all to avoid error. And in many other cases we not only may but must believe beyond the evidence or risk the loss of truth or good by our inactivity. At times our belief can even help create the truth.

This essay gives us an indication of James's understanding of truth, which receives further development in later works as his pragmatic theory of truth. At times he uses the term ambiguously, but the important point here is that truth for him is not an absolute which can be clearly recognized when it is attained.

James does consider the religious hypothesis to some extent in this essay, but we will find a fuller treatment of it in two other essays. First, however, we will give further attention to the legitimacy of belief in general as described in "The Sentiment of Rationality."

To attain "a conception of the frame of things which shall on the whole be more rational than that somewhat chaotic view which every one by nature carries about with him under his hat,"²⁰ is the task which philosophers set themselves to perform. But how does the philosopher

²⁰Ibid., p. 63.

recognize this rationality when he attains it? As he recognizes everything else, James replies, by certain subjective marks with which it affects him. "A strong feeling of ease, peace, rest, is one of them. The transition from a state of puzzle and perplexity to rational comprehension is full of lively relief and pleasure."²¹ Actually this feeling of rationality is mainly an absence of irrationality. Just as we feel no particular pleasure when we breathe freely but notice immediately if there is any obstruction of our breathing, so too our thoughts may seem to flow effortlessly until we meet with some difficulty which strikes us as irrational and stops the flow. It is this flow of the mind without the jarring of irrationality, this feeling of "the sufficiency of the present moment, . . . this absence of all need to explain it, account for it, justify it," that James calls "the Sentiment of Rationality."²²

One way of obtaining this fluency of thought is the theoretic way. As we face the sensible diversity of facts in the world, we have a theoretic need for unity, a need to see that the chaos before us is the expression of more simple underlying facts, to see for example that such apparently diverse objects as the moon and an apple are similar in their relation through gravity to the earth. By seeing similarities and finding simplicity we can handle the original data with less mental effort.²³

Alongside this passion for simplification there exists the passion

²¹Ibid., p. 63.

²²Ibid., p. 64.

²³Ibid., p. 65.

for distinguishing, the impulse to be acquainted with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole. This passion

loves to recognize particulars in their full completeness, and the more of these it can carry the happier it is. It prefers any amount of incoherence . . . to an abstract way of conceiving things that, while it simplifies them, ²⁴ dissolves away at the same time their concrete fullness.

Both of these demands must be met, and the combination in a particular person will determine his philosophic attitude. But the only way to balance this diversity and unity is to classify the diverse items as cases of a common essence discovered in them. This determines the characteristic of a theoretic philosophy:

A completed theoretic philosophy can thus never be anything more than a completed classification of the world's ingredients; and its results must always be abstract, since the basis of every classification is the abstract essence embedded in the living fact,--the rest of the living fact being for the time ignored by the classifier. ²⁵

It is this necessity of ignoring "the rest of the living fact" that causes the theoretic approach its difficulty. Any single explanation of a fact will be limited necessarily to that single point of view, leaving out the rest of real life. At times this theoretic approach is helpful and even necessary, but its simple classification of things is "a most miserable and inadequate substitute for the fullness of truth, . . . a monstrous abridgment of life, which, like all abridgments is got by the absolute loss and casting out of real matter."²⁶ While the theoretic approach can serve a purpose, ordi-

²⁴Ibid., p. 66.

²⁵Ibid., p. 67.

²⁶Ibid., p. 69.

narilly a person will take nothing as a substitute for life but living itself.

The inability of the theoretic approach to satisfy a person completely brings James to the practical side of rationality. He begins by looking for a "definition of the world which will give back to the mind the free motion which has been blocked in a purely contemplative path . . . [and] make the world seem rational again."²⁷ It is conceivable that there could be several views of the world all consistent with the facts and satisfying to our purely logical needs. If so, one that would awaken our "active impulses" or satisfy other aesthetic demands better than the others would be the more rational one, the one more capable of providing the mind with fluency. James then describes the tests of rationality our aesthetic and practical nature would use in evaluating these several systems equally satisfying to our logical needs.

First of all, it seems "that mere familiarity with things is able to produce a feeling of their rationality."²⁸ When we become accustomed to a thing, so that our mind can pass easily from it back to its antecedents and ahead to its consequents and around to the things with which it is related, then this fluency of our mind tinges the thing with the rational character. But it is especially the relation of a thing to its future consequences that is important. Our consciousness

²⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 76.

always contains an ingredient of expectancy, which we notice most when there is something either very painful or very pleasant impending. Especially impending pain keeps us from being at peace and at home in the present. Even uncertainty about the future can be unsettling, and the experience of coming to feel at home in a new place or with new people is the gradual lessening of the uncertainty and its accompanying uneasiness. As we become acquainted with the range of possibilities in the new place and with the new people, the feeling of strangeness lessens and we begin to feel at home.²⁹

A philosophical conception of the universe, if it is to be accepted as rational, must also at least in a general way banish uncertainty from the future. Such an attempt to satisfy expectancy has always been a fundamental part of ultimate explanations of the universe. There may be views which emphasize the uncertainty of the future, but these generally will be reactions to overly-confident optimistic views. For the most part it can be said that the first test our practical and aesthetic nature would use in evaluating a conception of the universe is its ability to define expectancy, to describe the future at least in a general way.³⁰ Man needs a conception of what the universe is like which includes some kind of assurance that basically and generally the universe will continue to be as it is. Such a view does not eliminate the possibility of change, but assures a person that the changes will

²⁹Ibid., 77-8.

³⁰Ibid., 79-82.

not be so radical that he cannot handle them.

But it is not enough for our nature to describe the future; it must do so in a way that is congruent with our powers. A pessimistic philosophy that tells people the future is incompatible with their desires and active tendencies will be to most men a source of more uneasiness than uncertainty itself. Better not to know, than to know that our efforts are hopeless. "But a second and worse defect in a philosophy than that of contradicting our active propensities is to give them no object whatever to press against."³¹ A philosophy that suggests no future to work for leaves man's most intimate powers with no object. "A nameless unheimlichkeit comes over us at the thought of there being nothing eternal in our final purposes, in the objects of those loves and aspirations which are our deepest energies."³² Down through history great achievements have resulted from man being challenged to use his active powers, with the promise that the future was indeed in some perhaps yet unforeseen way compatible with those powers.

This ability of a philosophy to describe the future in a way that challenges man's abilities will be the second test used by our practical and aesthetic nature in evaluating various views. Personal temperament enters in here, though, and different men will insist on being spoken to in different ways, since men's active impulses are so differently mixed.³³

³¹Ibid., p. 82.

³²Ibid., p. 83.

³³Ibid., 88-9.

The consideration of the sentiment of rationality in its practical aspect now brings us to an element of our active nature which "philosophers as a rule have with great insincerity tried to huddle out of sight in their pretension to found systems of absolute certainty. I mean the element of faith."³⁴ James takes faith to mean

belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance.³⁵

Faith is a necessary ingredient in our mental attitude. Even scientific philosophers admit this, but by a "singularly arbitrary caprice they say that it is only legitimate when used in the interests of one particular proposition,—the proposition, namely, that the course of nature is uniform."³⁶ This basis for scientific investigation is a working hypothesis, accepted in the beginning on faith. And yet the same attitude of faith in other areas is, according to some scientists, illogical and even shameful. But we cannot live or think at all without some degree of faith, some willingness to accept a "working hypothesis" and act upon it, expecting the results to disappoint us if our assumption has been false.³⁷

This brings us to a crucial point in James's argument in this

³⁴Ibid., p. 90.

³⁵Ibid., p. 90.

³⁶Ibid., p. 91.

³⁷Ibid., p. 95.

essay, similar to his conclusion in the previous one, that

belief (as measured by action) not only does and must continually outstrip scientific evidence, but that there is a certain class of truths of whose reality belief is a factor as well as a confessor; and that as regards this class of truths faith is not only licit and pertinent, but essential and indispensable. The truths cannot become true till our faith has made them so.³⁸

Again, there are areas where faith has no role. "The future movements of the stars or the facts of past history are determined now once for all, whether I like them or not."³⁹ But there are other facts that are not yet determined, and their determinations will depend in part on my personal contribution. This contribution demands a certain amount of subjective energy which in turn calls for at least some faith that the result will be attained. Take for example the view of the world as either optimistic or pessimistic. I can look at the misery, wickedness, and pain in the world, conclude that it is hopeless, and stop trying to change the situation. In so doing I am helping in my own, perhaps small, way to make true this belief. But if I look at the same facts with the belief that something can be done about the evils in the world and this belief touches my energies and prompts me to try to change the situation, then my belief in the optimistic view of the world is helping to make that view true. In situations like this where belief contributes to truth, it is ridiculous to say that belief has no place.⁴⁰

The investigation now comes to what James calls the radical ques-

³⁸Ibid., p. 96.

³⁹Ibid., p. 97.

⁴⁰Ibid., 100-2.

tion of life, "whether this be at bottom a moral or an unmoral universe."⁴¹ Does faith have a role in determining this fundamental issue? This really is the question of materialism, which James summarizes as follows:

Is the world a simple brute actuality, an existence de facto about which the deepest thing that can be said is that it happens so to be; or is the judgment of better or worse, of ought, as intimately pertinent to phenomena as the simple judgment is or is not?⁴²

For the materialist, the words "good" and "bad" have no meaning "apart from subjective passions and interests which we may, if we please, play fast and loose with at will."⁴³ When his feelings are at war with the facts around him, he "is always free to seek harmony by toning down the sensitiveness of the feelings."⁴⁴ But for the moralist there are certain things which not only are but ought to be, and when there is a clash with the world he cannot simply gain harmony by sacrificing his ideal interests. There are therefore times when the two views will call for different action, and it is this difference in behavior that assures us that we have here a meaningful issue.⁴⁵

Each view will call upon us to live its hypothesis and judge by our experience that it is the true one. And we can expect in a question

⁴¹Ibid., p. 103.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 104.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 105.

of this scope that "the experience of the entire human race must make the verification, and that all the evidence will not be 'in' till . . . the last man has had his say."⁴⁶ Then it will be clear whether this was "at bottom a moral or an unmoral universe." But in the meantime our initial faith certainly has a role to play. If we believe that it is a moral universe where 'good' and 'better' apply, and then we live according to this belief, we are helping to create a moral universe just as certainly as our initial belief in an "unmoral" universe will help to create that one. Certainly we cannot keep our faith out of the question and doubt. To doubt that the universe is moral and therefore not act is in effect to deny that it is moral.

What James provides in this essay is a description of his meaning of "rationality" and how the mind recognizes it. In the history of philosophy, rationality connotes universal and necessary knowledge, with an emphasis on thought and logical reasoning. James opposed this conception of rationality, especially as he felt it was embodied in the systematic and theoretical philosophies of Kant, Hegel, Leibniz, and others. This type of rationality puts too much emphasis on thought alone and separates it too distinctly from feeling. James's key phrase, the sentiment of rationality, indicates that for him feeling and thought are part of the same context, intertwined in man's experience. He had indicated this earlier in The Principles of Psychology, pointing out the similarity of feeling and thought in that both are part of cognition.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴⁷ William James, The Principles of Psychology (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950), Vol. I, p. 222.

In the present essay he states that rationality is recognized by the feeling of ease and peace it arouses in a person. Rationality for James is much more than thought alone. It is closer perhaps to the feeling a person has when he finds that his experience makes sense or is reasonable, when he is able to deal with that experience without being jarred by inconsistencies.

Rationality as James understands it is the key term in this study. The present chapter is a description of James's view that belief in general and religious belief in particular are reasonable in the sense of producing this sentiment of rationality. The third chapter will examine particular religious experiences to determine their rationality in this broader Jamesian sense.

Essential to his view is the role of the practical reason in maintaining the fluency of thought which he takes to be rationality. Important too is the description of the inner needs of man that must be met by a philosophic view, demanding of a system of thought not just logical consistency, but the ability to describe the future at least in a general way and in a manner that encourages a person's abilities. Faith is an essential element in this practical way of conceiving the universe, and in many questions, including the basic character of the universe, faith in a view can help to make it true.

A further description of the basic needs of man in determining his world view is given in the essay "Is Life Worth Living?" It indicates as well what religion can do, positively and negatively, in meeting these basic needs.

James notes that some people would answer the question "Is life

worth living?" with an enthusiastic "yes" because of their built-in optimism and their inability to believe that anything seriously evil can exist. But this is hardly universal, and in fact "the whole army of suicides" declare that sometimes life is not worth living. His goal in this essay is to formulate what we might say to a person who is weary of life with that "metaphysical tedium vitae which is peculiar to reflecting men," that pessimism that can come from "too much questioning and too little active responsibility."⁴⁸

In describing this weariness and this pessimism James makes clear that he feels it is a religious disease with its reflective source in "the contradiction between the phenomena of nature and the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is."⁴⁹ The religious man naturally tends to look at the universe and expect to find there traces of the wisdom and goodness of the God who made it. But in looking at nature and the real world he finds so much hideousness with the beauty, so much cruelty with the love, and so much death with life. It is in this contradiction "between the supposed being of a spirit that encompasses and owns us . . . and the character of such a spirit as revealed by the visible world's course"⁵⁰ that the pessimism and melancholy lie. Some men might be able to shrug off or ignore this evil and this contradiction, but not the man for whom the "religious craving" is

⁴⁸James, The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, 38-9.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 40.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 42.

real.

This leads, James feels, to "the inevitable bankruptcy of natural religion" with its proofs for a "Moral and Intelligent Contriver of the World." We know the evil of nature as well as the good, and we can hardly worship unreservedly a God whose adequate expression would be that nature. Either there is no God revealed in nature, or he is inadequately revealed; and "what we call visible nature, or this world, must be but a veil and surface-show whose full meaning resides in a supplementary unseen or other world."⁵¹

In fact, says James, the first step toward getting into a healthy relationship with the universe may be to rebel against this God of natural religion who is tied so directly to the evil of the world. It is precisely the implied contradiction between such a supposedly good God and a world mixed with evil that causes the pessimism and melancholy in the religious man. The existence of that kind of God results in a "monistic" view, with God as the "one and only Power" who must therefore be the explanation of the evil as well as the good. But if a person can be emancipated from this "monistic superstition," then he can take on the evils of the world individually without having to worry about their derivation from the "one and only Power."⁵² Just this emancipation might encourage the person whose pessimism has made him weary of life to go on living now, since the evils he faces are finite ones that he can help to overthrow.

⁵¹Ibid., 43-4.

⁵²Ibid., p. 46.

Eliminating an inadequate view of religion such as this frees a man, but is there anything more positive that religion itself can do to offset this pessimism and weariness of life? Religion and religious faith refer here essentially to the belief "in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained."⁵³ James's thesis is

that we have a right to believe the physical order to be only a partial order; that we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust, if only, thereby life may seem to us better worth living again.⁵⁴

The mushrooming of discoveries in science itself indicates that we have had only a glimpse of what the universe will eventually prove to be, and therefore "the world of our present natural knowledge is enveloped in a larger world of some sort of whose residual properties we at present can frame no positive idea."⁵⁵ While admitting that, agnostic positivism tells us that we have no right to suppose anything about that unseen part until we have sensible evidence; we can dream no dreams, form no hypotheses or beliefs. Such neutrality might be possible if we had no stake in the unknown. But both doubt and belief involve conduct; doubting the religious hypothesis while waiting for more evidence means living as if it were untrue. Furthermore, this neutrality demands that our inner interests have no real connection with the forces that the hidden world may contain. Even if we have an inner need of believing that this world

⁵³Ibid., p. 51.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 52.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 54.

of nature is only a sign of something more spiritual and eternal, positivism would forbid us to act upon it, although the inner demand on the part of scientists for logical harmony in the universe has led them to many scientific discoveries.

Science, then, has no authority to tell us not to trust our inner need to go beyond the visible world. And trusting our religious demands means living in the light of them, acting "as if the invisible world they suggest were real."⁵⁶ If we could be certain that our bravery and patience in facing adversity in this life were bearing fruit somewhere in an unseen spiritual world, even the most adverse life would seem worth living. We cannot be certain, and yet science cannot show this belief to be impossible, and we are free to trust it at our own risk. Furthermore, "optimism and pessimism are definitions of the world, and . . . our own reactions on the world, small as they are in bulk, are integral parts of the whole thing, and necessarily help to determine the definition."⁵⁷

James admits that there are many "maybes" connected with believing and acting upon the religious hypothesis. But it can give meaning to our lives to believe that by our actions something is eternally gained for the universe, and that even the visible order of goodness we believe in we can help to create. If we believe in the depths of our being and are eager to enter the fight, then the scientific veto will sound like "mere chattering of the teeth."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 56.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

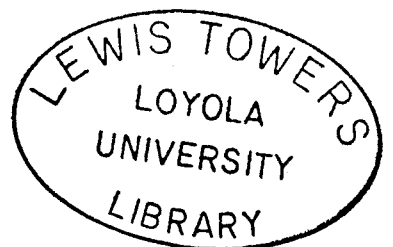
⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 62.

This essay, therefore, does more than indicate that it is permissible to believe; it points out what belief can do to make a person's life worth living. Once the reflective person has been freed from the "monistic superstition" and sees that the evils of the world can be dealt with singly, the religious hypothesis can challenge his powers to work for a better world, trusting that his courage may be bearing fruit in an unseen order and helping to create the good he believes in. The emphasis is on the inner need of the person to believe, more than the rationale of the religious hypothesis itself. Religious belief does not go against the facts, but conceivably at this point there could also be other hypotheses to challenge a person's powers and make life worth living.

The fourth essay, "Reflex Action and Theism," will concentrate more directly on the religious hypothesis as the one which best meets the basic needs of man. Early in the essay James summarizes what people generally know of the theory of reflex action. In physiological terms it means that "the acts we perform are always the result of outward discharges from the nervous centres, and that these outward discharges are themselves the result of impressions from the external world, carried in along one or another of our sensory nerves."⁵⁹

From being applied at first to just a portion of our behavior, the theory has been generalized to explain all human behavior. The structural unit of the nervous system is seen to form a triad, with sensory

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 113.



impression existing only to awaken the central process of reflection, which in turn exists only for the sake of action. None of the three elements can function independently. Even the middle stage of contemplation or thinking is only a "place of transit." If it would not have roots in the outer world or would not result in active measures, it would not be fulfilling its function. "The current of life which runs in at our eyes or ears is meant to run out at our hands, feet, or lips."⁶⁰ All three have a role, but perception and thinking exist for the sake of behavior.

In beginning to apply the speculative consequences of this theory to theism, James notes in passing that some writers feel that reflex action gives "the coup de grace to the superstition of a God."⁶¹ He chooses not to enter this debate about the existence of God. Rather, he will try to show that if the human mind is actually a triadic structure of impression, reflection, and reaction as the reflex action theory indicates, then "a God, whether existent or not, is at all events the kind of being which, if he did exist, would form the most adequate possible object for minds framed like our own to conceive as lying at the root of the universe."⁶² In other words, some outward reality defined as God's nature must be defined, "is the only ultimate object that is at the same time rational and possible for the human mind's

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 114.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 115.

⁶²Ibid.

contemplation."⁶³ Theism then becomes "the centre of gravity of all attempts to solve the riddle of life,--some falling below it by defect, some flying above it by excess, itself alone satisfying every mental need in strictly normal measure."⁶⁴

This will be, James realizes, a subjective consideration of theism, based on its congruity with our nature as thinkers. The objective side of theism, God's actual existence, is left untouched. If God "be really the living truth," this will indicate that the structure of our mind is actually in accordance with the nature of reality. Whether this be the case or not is, according to James, "one of those questions that belong to the province of personal faith to decide."⁶⁵ The structure of our mind needs God; whether he actually exists, each person is entitled to doubt or to believe on his own responsibility and at his own risk.

Before defining God and theism and undertaking the proof of his thesis, James mentions a consequence of the reflex theory of mind that he feels not even all physiologists recognize, namely that "it commits them to regarding the mind as an essentially teleological mechanism."⁶⁶ In other words, the mind's middle department, the conceiving or theorizing faculty, functions solely for the sake of ends "that do not exist at all in the world of impressions we receive by way of our senses, but

⁶³Ibid., p. 116.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 117.

are set by our emotional and practical subjectivity altogether."⁶⁷ The conceiving faculty transforms the world of our impressions into a totally different world, the world of our conception, and this remodeling of the "brute order of our experience" is done in accordance with our "volitional nature," which includes our subjective purposes, preferences, and our fondness for certain effects, forms and orders.⁶⁸

The sum of our actual experience at any given moment as it is given is utter chaos. From the mixture of sounds, colors, forms, and the various feelings aroused in us we have to pick out "the items which concern us, and connecting them with others far away, which we say 'belong' with them, we are able to make out definite threads of sequence and tendency; to foresee particular liabilities and get ready for them; and to enjoy simplicity and harmony in place of what was chaos."⁶⁹ We take the real order of the world with all its chaos and "we break it into histories, and we break it into arts, and we break it into sciences; and then we begin to feel at home."⁷⁰ But we do this for our own purposes, in response to our own concerns, postulating that there is a harmony between our "volitional nature" and the nature of things. This the theologian does, no less and no more than the artist or the man of science.

In coming then to the question regarding the kind of being God

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 117-8.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 118.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 119.

would be if he did exist, the first step is to sort out the essential features from among the many meanings the word 'God' has taken on in the history of human thought. Setting aside the many sectarian disputes about the attributes of God and his metaphysical relation to the phenomenal world, James lists as the essential features of theism, first, that "God be conceived as the deepest power in the universe; and, second, he must be conceived under the form of a mental personality."⁷¹ Mainly this means that God's personality

is to be regarded, like any other personality, as something lying outside of my own and other than me, and whose existence I simply come upon and find. A power not ourselves, then, which not only makes for righteousness, but means it, and which recognizes us,—such is the definition which I think nobody will be inclined to dispute.⁷²

There have been of course various attempts to fill out the description of God's personality and manner of his recognition of us, but the essential point about the divine personality and ours is "that both have purposes for which they care, and each can hear the other's call."⁷³

The reference to the many attempts in human history to fill out the description of God brings us to a point of connection with the reflex action theory of mind. There are not only concrete, particular objects that present themselves to the mind and evoke a response; the whole universe itself "knocks on our mental door and asks to be let in, and fixed and decided upon and actively met."⁷⁴ Faiths, systems, phi-

⁷¹Ibid., p. 122.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 123.

losophies, scepticisms are all attempts by the mind to deal with this universe. But the function of all these conceptions of the universe is to pass into the third stage, the stage of action. They are the middle stage, not the end, and no matter how splendid they seem in themselves as conceptions, they have only one function, to define the direction which our activity will take. In fact, if two apparently different definitions of reality would have identical consequences, they are actually identical definitions.⁷⁵

Furthermore, no view of the universe will be accepted as rational and will satisfy the mind unless it satisfies all three departments of the mind, not violating the essential mode of activity of any department, or leaving any without a chance to work. Materialism, for example, with its emphasis upon atoms, and agnosticism with its doubting, give a solution which is irrational to the third department; their conceptions offer no proper object for our active powers. Theism, on the other hand, presents "the most practically rational solution it is possible to conceive."⁷⁶ It calls upon all the energies of our active nature. "At a single stroke, it changes the dead blank it of the world into a living thou, with whom the whole man may have dealings."⁷⁷

Because of its ability to challenge man's practical nature, theism is taken as the norm for conceptions of the world. "Infra-theistic" conceptions, such as materialism and agnosticism, are irrational because

⁷⁵Ibid., 123-4.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 127.

⁷⁷Ibid.

they are inadequate stimuli to man's practical nature. He will now consider "ultra-theistic" conceptions, those that go beyond God.

One of the essential attributes of God mentioned earlier was that he is "a personality lying outside our own and other than us,--a power not ourselves."⁷⁸ What James means here by "ultra-theistic" views is any attempt to go beyond the ultimate duality of God and his believer, and to transform it into some sort of identity. Infra-theistic views regard the world as an it, theism as a thou, while these other theories try to make it part of me. This should not be confused with the "oneness with God" through self-surrender which characterizes the highest moments of theistic consciousness. This is a practical union with God in which God and the person are still two. The theist in this case does not somehow lose his identity in God or in thought; he knows that he himself "simply is, and needs God; and that behind this universe God simply is and will be forever, and will in some way hear his call."⁷⁹ He finds no need for continued contemplation on the nature of God, but can respond to his God with a religious reaction.

James's own choice is to join the theist in the conviction that "to the end of time our power of moral and volitional response to the nature of things will be the deepest organ of communication therewith we shall ever possess."⁸⁰ For James, our destiny lies in active co-operation with God's creation and his purposes, "not in any chimerical

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 134.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 135.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 141.

speculative conquest of him, not in any theoretic drinking of him up."⁸¹
 To serve this universe is our task, and the most any theory can do is
 to bring us to that.

These four essays, therefore, provide us with James's approach to belief in general and the religious hypothesis in particular. In the process, his underlying view of the world comes through. He consciously rejects a monistic view where evil is directly traced to God and must somehow be explained as caused by a supposedly good God. When God is not so directly tied to evil, then there is more hope for man to deal with the individual evils of life. He rejects determinism as well, believing that there is scope for man's activity in the universe; he is not handed a finished product to which he has no contribution. In the area of knowledge he rejects scepticism and maintains that man can approach ever closer to truth. But he believes in truth as an empiricist, not an absolutist; we can know the truth, but we cannot know for certain that we have reached some kind of absolute truth. We test our hypotheses by living, trusting that the evidence will tell us whether or not we are approaching truth; but no bell will ring to assure us that we have arrived. His emphasis is on seeking truth, not merely avoiding error; losing the truth through inactivity can be worse than sometimes being in error. Finally, rationality involves much more than a theoretical approach. The "sentiment" of rationality means a fluency of mind that cannot be attained by theoretical reason alone. If the mind is to keep

⁸¹Ibid., p. 141.

"flowing," a view presented to it must speak to a person's practical and aesthetic nature, his "volitional" nature. The whole man is involved, and more than merely logical needs must be met. The mind is in fact a triadic structure, and perception and conception are for the sake of action.

Against this background James can justify belief in the sense of going beyond sensible and scientific evidence. We do in fact go beyond such evidence; even science does so, more than it seems willing to admit. Some questions cannot be answered by science, such as moral questions and those involving personal relations. There are times when it is necessary to go beyond scientific evidence, times when not to decide is to say no, and when the action called for is so important that the decision cannot await more evidence even if it would be forthcoming. Then too there are times when the outcome requires our personal contribution, and in such cases our belief can help to make the proposition true. Finally, we need a view of the world beyond purely scientific facts to challenge our innermost powers and to reply to our deepest needs; it is such a view that will make life worth living and maintain the sentiment of rationality.

The religious hypothesis is one such way of going beyond the evidence, providing an unseen order that helps the seen order make sense by giving meaning to our efforts. The God of theism, the deepest power in the universe and a personality who "hears our call," is the best possible object for our mind, structured as it is, because he is the one who can sustain as well as challenge our deepest powers and give meaning to our efforts without causing us to be "swallowed up" in pure thought or consciousness. Whether or not God exists, belief in him is the hypothesis

best suited to our structure and our needs because it speaks to our moral and volitional powers, and it is through these powers that we communicate with our world in the deepest way.

Therefore, according to James, belief is reasonable, or in his terminology, rational. But much of the space in the essays was given to belief in general, and we would expect James to want to give more particular attention to the religious hypothesis once belief in general is justified. And, as concerned as he was about remaining true to the experiences of the individual, it is only natural that he would carefully study not just religious belief but individual religious experiences. Granted that belief of some kind is necessary, this will shed more light on the ability of the religious hypothesis to call forth our belief and answer our deepest needs in a way that is rational.

CHAPTER III

THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

If a person accepts religious belief as reasonable, as James did, this opens up a range of data that would otherwise not be revealed, the area of religious experiences. As a philosopher opposed to traditional rationalism, he wanted to defend the reasonableness of experience and the need to take it seriously in all its richness and complexity; but he was particularly interested in defending the reasonableness of religious experience. In The Varieties of Religious Experience, the Gifford Lectures given at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1901 and 1902, he approached the subject using the perspective of the psychologist, providing a descriptive survey of the religious propensities of man. But he remained a philosopher as well, intent on determining the rationality of religious experience, rationality in his sense of reasonableness. This chapter will be an attempt to pull together his criteria for judging the rationality of religious experience, and an examination of his conclusions.

From the point of view of method, there can be two orders of inquiry in any investigation. The first considers the nature, constitution, origin, and history of whatever is under investigation

and issues in an existential proposition. The second considers its importance, meaning, or significance now that it is here, and the investigation about it results in a proposition of value, or what may be called a spiritual judgment. The present discussion will therefore involve two basic questions: what are the religious propensities of man, and what is their philosophic significance?¹

The study will not focus on the "second-hand religious life" of ordinary believers who simply follow the conventional religious observances that have been handed on to them by tradition. Rather, it will be concerned with "the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct."² These experiences will be found in the "geniuses" of religious life, people for whom religion was much more than a dull habit. These are the religious leaders and founders for whom religion was intensely personal, men and women with a keen awareness of God and a vision of their own mission in the world. Like geniuses in other areas, those in religion have often shown symptoms of nervous instability. Religious leaders even more perhaps than other kinds of genius

have been creatures of exalted emotional sensibility,
 . . . often . . . have led a discordant inner life,
 . . . had melancholy during a part of their career,
 . . . been liable to obsessions and fixed ideas; and
 frequently they have fallen into trances, heard voices,

¹William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: Mentor Books, New American Library, Inc., 1958), p. 22-23.

²Ibid., p. 24.

seen visions, and presented all sorts of peculiarities which are ordinarily classed as pathological.³

A concrete study cannot ignore these pathological aspects, even though there is often the fear that explaining such connections with religious experience will explain away the significance of the religious experience itself. This is not true; nor is the charge that religious experience arises simply from some organic condition in a person. As a matter of fact all of our states of mind are in some way conditioned by our organic processes. But to begin explaining away the value of religious experience because of any connection with pathological experiences or organic conditions is to blur two modes of inquiry. The value of a particular religious experience is determined by the effect it has on the person, the contribution it makes to his life, not on the way in which the experience may have originated. The origins of a person's religious experience are often inaccessible to us, but we can see and evaluate the effects in the way he lives his life.⁴

This concern with the effects of religious experience in a person's life, the practical fruits of his religious belief, will be central to our study in this chapter. It will be one of the criteria James uses in determining the rationality of religious experience. This interest in evaluating practical effects is further developed later in James's theory of pragmatism. In this

³Ibid., p. 24.

⁴Ibid., p. 34.

sense The Varieties of Religious Experience is the foundation for his Pragmatism.

And yet, while it is the effects of religious experience that we evaluate, it is helpful to study the origins and accompanying circumstances as well, even if this involves us in exaggerated and sometimes pathological experience. These exaggerated experiences "play the part in mental anatomy which the scalpel and the microscope play in the anatomy of the body."⁵ We can then see the experience out of its more usual surroundings and become familiar with a wider range of its variations. At the same time it is important to see that religious phenomena are "special cases of kinds of human experience of much wider scope."⁶ Religious melancholy is still melancholy, religious happiness is still happiness, and it helps us to understand the distinctive significance of the religious experiences by comparing them with other experiences of the same general type. But as important as this comparison is, the test of value remains the same: by its fruits, not its roots.

Among the many different possible ways of approaching religion, then, James has chosen personal religion in its "first-hand" experience, rather than the institutional religion which develops later. He takes religion to mean

the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men
in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves

⁵Ibid., p. 35.

⁶Ibid., p. 37.

to stand in⁷ relation to whatever they may consider the divine.

In order to include systems of thought such as Buddhism which do not actually assume a God, and yet call for a religious response from their followers, the word "divine" will be taken in a wider sense to denote "any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not."⁸ But on the other hand if the term "godlike" becomes too general and includes everything that men have ever considered "gods," the study will lose its specifically religious character. A man's religion is indeed his total reaction upon life, but it cannot be said that every total reaction upon life is a religion. "There are trifling, sneering attitudes even towards the whole of life; and in some men these attitudes are final and systematic."⁹ Regardless of the value of such "trifling and sneering" attitudes as ways of looking at life, it would be straining our ordinary understanding of the word to call them "religious." For most men religion implies a serious state of mind which "says 'hush' to all vain chatter and smart wit," but is opposed as well to the "heavy grumbling and complaint" which fails to see meaning in the world's tragedy.

There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we demoninate religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must

⁷Ibid., p. 42.

⁸Ibid., p. 44.

⁹Ibid., p. 45.

not scream or curse. So I propose -- arbitrarily again, if you please -- to narrow our definition once more by saying that . . . the divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest.¹⁰

A comparison of religion with morality in general provides another characteristic. Both are concerned with the way we face the universe, but morality often tends to simply accept the law of the universe as if it were a yoke, whereas with religion the response is much more enthusiastic. And this added dimension of emotion, James feels, is found nowhere but in religion.¹¹ We are in fact dependent upon the universe, and this dependence will call forth sacrifices and surrenders of some sort. In "those states of mind which fall short of religion, the surrender is submitted to as an imposition of necessity, and the sacrifice is undergone at the very best without complaint."¹² In the religious life, however, "surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused." Religion then makes easier an acceptance of the universe which is necessary anyway, and performs a function "which no other portion of our nature can so successfully fulfill."¹³ That religion thus fulfills a

¹⁰Ibid., p. 47.

¹¹Ibid., p. 54.

¹²Ibid., p. 56.

¹³Ibid., p. 56.

basic need in man is a conclusion, says James, to which we will be led by the empirical investigation of religious experience.

The first form of religious experience we will consider will be the "religion of healthy-mindedness." Noting that happiness is one of the chief concerns in life, James states that the ordinary believer will often regard the happiness which a religious belief affords as a proof of its truth. Whether to do so is correct or not, it emphasizes the importance of happiness in a man's life.¹⁴

For some people happiness seems to be congenital. They see God and nature as good, can think no ill of man, and find it impossible to linger over the evils in the world. They are "once-born" rather than "twice-born" in that they seem to need no deliverance from evil. Emerson and Whitman are examples of this "healthy-mindedness . . . which looks on all things and sees that they are good."¹⁵

In addition to this involuntary healthy-mindedness by which a person immediately feels happy, there is a more voluntary and systematic type. As every abstract way of conceiving things takes one aspect as the essence and temporarily disregards the others, systematic healthy-mindedness takes good as the essential aspect of being and deliberately excludes evil from its vision. This is not as intellectually dishonest as it may seem at first. "Happiness,

¹⁴Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 83.

like every other emotional state, has blindness and insensibility to opposing facts given it as its instinctive weapon for self-protection against disturbance."¹⁶ This deliberate adoption of an optimistic attitude can then grow into a religious policy in a way that is certainly not absurd. This process answers a tendency we all have to divert our attention from evil as much as we can.

An especially interesting religious example of systematic healthy-mindedness, according to James, is the "Mind-Cure movement." Its doctrinal sources include the four Gospels, New England transcendentalism, Berkeleyan idealism, Hinduism, spiritism, and evolutionism with an emphasis on progress. Its characteristic feature is "an intuitive belief in the all-saving power of healthy-minded attitudes" such as courage, hope, and trust, along with a contempt for doubt, fear, and worry.¹⁷ This belief has been generally corroborated by the experience of those people who have found a healing for their mind and body, and the spread of the movement is due mainly to these practical fruits. Whether or not there are people who could not be influenced by these ideas, the large number who have been so influenced makes it worthy of consideration and respect.

The mind-cure movement shares the general basis of all religious experience, acknowledgment that man has a dual nature and is connected with two spheres of thought. But for the mind-cure the

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

essential vice in the lower sphere is fear. In the higher level, the spiritual in man appears as "partly conscious, but chiefly subconscious; and through the subconscious part of it we are already one with the Divine without any miracle of grace, or abrupt creation of a new inner man."¹⁸ While fear and all egoistic modes of thought lead to destruction, the way to life is to come into a conscious realization of our oneness with the Divine and to open ourselves fully to the flow of the Infinite Life through us. To the degree to which a person realizes his oneness with the Infinite Spirit, to that extent he will exchange "disease for ease, inharmony for harmony, suffering and pain for abounding health and strength."¹⁹ James lists several accounts by people who have been restored to health through this mind-cure doctrine.

The mind-cure movement is obviously optimistic. Evil is empirically present for its followers as for anyone, but there is no speculative explanation of it; evil is something to be transcended and forgotten, with attention focused on the regenerative power of optimistic thinking.²⁰

James then points out a psychological similarity between the mind-cure movement and the Lutheran and Wesleyan movements. All begin with a man's realization that there is something wrong with him, and his question about what he must do to become well and whole, or

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 92.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 96-97.

in religious terms, saved. The answers too are similar. Luther and Wesley tell a person he is already saved if he would only believe it; the mind-curers tell him he is already well and whole, if he would only realize his real being. And it is the adequacy of the mind-cure message to the mental needs of a large portion of mankind that accounts for its spread. The same type of adequacy accounted for the spread of the Lutheran and Wesleyan movements.²¹

James notes that the "official moralists" advise us never to relax our efforts to change for the better, but rather to be vigilant and to shrink from no effort. But the Lutheran, Methodist, and mind-cure movements seem to offer evidence for the position that there are many people for whom, at least at a certain stage in their development, a change of character for the better comes about by just the opposite of this advice, by a surrender, a relaxing, a letting go, resigning oneself to higher powers. This is a kind of salvation through self-despair, a dying to be truly born. James concludes that "this is certainly one fundamental form of human experience. Some say that the capacity or incapacity for it is what divides the religious from the merely moralistic character."²² At any rate, mind-curers have shown that this form of regeneration by relaxing and letting go, "psychologically indistinguishable from the Lutheran justification by faith and the Wesleyan acceptance of

²¹Ibid., p. 97.

²²Ibid., p. 99.

free grace, is within the reach of persons who have no conviction of sin and care nothing for the Lutheran theology."²³ But the results of this relaxation and abandonment of effort are facts of human nature, no matter what theory we adopt for their ultimate explanation.

Furthermore, along with reasoned advice, the founders of mind-cure have made great use of the subconscious life and have emphasized "systematic exercise in passive relaxation, concentration, and meditation,"²⁴ which does not seem to differ intrinsically from the practice of "recollection" in Catholic discipline. Both involve an awareness of the presence of God and a oneness with God which gives a person strength in the midst of his daily activities.

Science, of course, would not accept mind-cure's belief in a higher power that will take care of us if we only throw ourselves upon it. And yet mind-cure uses science's own method of verification; it invites a person to live as if its hypothesis were true and to see whether or not his experience will verify it. The growth of the movement indicates that for many people experience does verify it. For them, at least, science cannot veto the mind-cure movement. From this James concludes that the universe is a "more many-sided affair than any sect, even the scientific sect, allows for."²⁵ The world can be handled according to many systems of ideas,

²³Ibid., p. 99.

²⁴Ibid., p. 102.

²⁵Ibid., p. 107.

each providing some kind of profit while omitting some other. Evidently, then, science and religion

are both of them genuine keys for unlocking the world's treasure-house to him who can use either of them practically. Just as evidently neither is exhaustive or exclusive of the other's simultaneous use.²⁶

Science, therefore, cannot veto the mind-cure movement for those for whom its practical fruits have been helpful, and in this sense mind-cure is a rational religious view. Furthermore, it speaks to the common human desire for happiness and builds upon what seems to be a fundamental form of human experience in its regeneration by relaxation and surrender to higher powers, an experience shared by the Lutheran and Wesleyan movements, and shared as well in its method of meditation and recollection by Catholicism and by Eastern religions. It is this basis in shared experience, along with the practical fruits, which provides the test of rationality for mind-cure, and healthy-mindedness in general, as a religious belief.

However, there are people who cannot so easily rid themselves of the consciousness of evil. For some, evil is merely a wrong correspondence of their life and their environment, curable by changing either of the two factors or both. For others, evil is something more radical, a wrongness in man's nature which no superficial rearranging can cure, requiring rather a supernatural remedy. In psychological terms we can speak of the different "thresholds" of a person, with

²⁶ Ibid., p. 107.

some people living on the "sunny side" of their misery-threshold, while the depressed and melancholy live beyond theirs.²⁷

There is in fact evidence that all is not as optimistic as the healthy-minded would have us believe. The joys of this life are insecure at best.

Unsuspectedly from the bottom of every fountain of pleasure, as the old poet said, something bitter rises up: a touch of nausea, a falling dead of the delight, a whiff of melancholy, things that sound a knell, for fugitive as they may be, they bring a feeling of coming from a deeper region and often have an appalling convincingness. The buzz of life ceases at their touch as a piano-string stops sounding when the damper falls upon it.²⁸

Even if a person has not experienced this precariousness in his own life, seeing the misfortune of so many other people would force him to recognize that his good fortune could easily be otherwise. Our solution must go deeper than actually escaping misfortune.

The fact that we can die, that we can be ill at all, is what perplexes us. . . . We need a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the Goods of nature.²⁹

This is why a view of life that does not give meaning beyond the present moment will never satisfy. If the present moment leads nowhere and has no deeper meaning, no amount of ignoring or forgetting will hide its hollowness.

We will see later the joy of "twice-born" people whose religion is

²⁷Ibid., p. 116-117.

²⁸Ibid., P. 118.

²⁹Ibid., p. 121.

non-naturalistic. But the securest way to the happiness they report has been as a matter of fact through a radical pessimism that involves the person in pathological melancholy. After describing various kinds of pathological depression, James cites examples of religious melancholy, beginning with Tolstoy, whose personal account describes how his life gradually lost all its meaning and zest, and became dreary and joyless. John Bunyan's melancholy, described next, resulted from his psychopathic temperament and sensitive conscience, leading to doubts and fears about the condition of his own personal self. The third type of melancholy, based on James's own experience, takes the form of fear of the universe. How a person can recover from such religious melancholy will be described later, but the point here is to realize the radical pessimism experienced by such "morbid-minded" people and to see how far removed it is from healthy-mindedness. To people suffering from such religious melancholy, the attitude of healthy-mindedness seems shallow indeed.³⁰

In attempting to compare the two viewpoints as an impartial observer, James feels that morbid-mindedness "ranges over the wider scale of experience."³¹ The method of healthy-mindedness, to ignore evil and live only in the light of good, does work for many people, and as long as it does it is a valuable viewpoint for them. But it breaks down when faced with melancholy. Furthermore, the evil facts which it chooses to ignore are a genuine part of reality. It may be that there

³⁰ Ibid., p. 124-137.

³¹ Ibid., p. 137.

are some forms of evil which will never fit into a total view of the universe and will be best handled by being ignored. But in the meantime, they are still there, and it would seem that a view which admits their presence and deals with them would be a more adequate philosophic doctrine than healthy-mindedness with its unwillingness to give them any attention.³² We saw in the previous lecture the rationality that healthy-mindedness does have as a religious belief. We see now that it is limited to certain people and certain conditions, and it breaks down when asked to deal with melancholy and evil. Here another kind of religion is needed, a religion of deliverance.

James will now focus attention on the "twice-born," the person for whom natural good is insufficient in itself and for whom evil is very real, and who must therefore die to the natural to be reborn in the spiritual. First will come a treatment of the general psychological basis of the twice-born character.

This basis lies in "a certain discordancy or heterogeneity in the native temperament of the subject, an incompletely unified moral and intellectual constitution."³³ Some people seem to be born with their impulses consistent with one another, but others in varying degrees find much more of a conflict within them, echoing the words of St. Paul, "What I would, that I do not; but what I hate, that I do." The normal evolution of character then consists in the "straightening out and

³²Ibid., p. 138-139.

³³Ibid., p. 141.

unifying of the inner self. . . . The higher and the lower feelings, the useful and the erring impulses, . . . must end by forming a stable system of functions in right subordination."³⁴ This process of unification itself may come gradually or quickly. "It may come through altered feelings or through altered powers of action; or it may come through new intellectual insights, or through experiences which we shall later have to designate as 'mystical.'"³⁵ However the unification comes, it brings with it a characteristic kind of relief and happiness.

It is important to notice that reaching this unification through religion is only one way; the process of unification is a basic human process, and the religious types of regeneration are only one species of a genus that includes other types as well. The new birth may in fact be away from religion and morality, and the unification may be brought on by such diverse passions as "love, ambition, cupidity, revenge, or patriotic devotion."³⁶

When this process of the unification of the self is seen in religious terms, we have the experience of conversion. To understand the psychological elements in this conversion process, it helps to notice how a person's ideas, aims, and objects form different internal systems relatively independent of each other. As a particular aim becomes the center of his attention, the ideas and objects connected with another

³⁴Ibid., p. 143.

³⁵Ibid., p. 146.

³⁶Ibid., p. 147.

aim fade into the background. When the President of the United States, for example, is away on a fishing trip, his aim and the system of ideas related to it is much different from the aim and ideas when he is functioning as President. Often in an ordinary day we pass from one aim and focus of interest to another. But even in a deeper and more basic way a person's interest may shift periodically from one aim to another and leave him with the experience of being a "divided self." The same feeling of being divided may result when one aim is actually responsible for his activities, but there are other aims present to him on the outskirts of his mind as "pious wishes" or "fleeting aspirations."³⁷

As our lives go on, then, our aims and interests shift, and, perhaps, even change. "Things hot and vital to us to-day are cold to-morrow,"³⁸ often leaving us with the feeling of being a wavering and divided self. When the "focus of excitement and heat, the point of view from which the aim is taken, . . . [come to lie] permanently within a certain system, . . . if the change be a religious one, we call it a conversion, especially if it be by crisis, or sudden."³⁹ If we refer to the "hot place" in man's consciousness, the group of ideas to which he is devoted and from which he works, as the "habitual centre of his personal energy," the conversion means that religious ideas which previously were peripheral in his consciousness now take a central place and become the habitual center of his personal energy.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 160-161.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 161.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

Precisely how or why this shift takes place is hard to say, often even for the person experiencing it. It seems that at times a new perception or a sudden emotional shock will create a new "centre of gravity" in a person and the structure will remain permanent, the person having then "found himself" or gotten himself "together."

James then refers to Professor Starbuck's conclusion that the conversion process in young people brought up in evangelical circles is parallel to "that growth into a larger spiritual life which is a normal phase of adolescence in every class of human beings."⁴⁰ The parallels in age, symptoms, and results bring one to the conclusion that conversion "is in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child's small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity."⁴¹ Even adult conversions follow a similar passage through a sense of incompleteness and anxiety to the relief of a different and usually wider view.

Conversions will have different characteristics depending upon the individual. Some may involve mainly a change of behavior with little intellectual readjustment or theology. Others may have been precipitated by the meaninglessness of life and will involve more of an intellectual character. Furthermore, not everyone is open to conversion; for various reasons, religious ideas do not become for some people the center of their personal energy, although even this condition can change.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 164.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 164.

⁴² Ibid., p. 167-168.

In further describing the conversion process, James refers to the common human experience of trying to remember a name. The first approach is definitely to try, working at it with a conscious effort. But sometimes this fails, and the harder we try the less hope there seems to be, "as though the name were jammed, and pressure in its direction only kept it all the more from rising."⁴³ But often if we give up trying to remember and think of something else, soon "the lost name comes sauntering into your mind, as Emerson says, as carelessly as if it had never been invited."⁴⁴ The previous effort had started some kind of hidden process which continued after the effort ceased.

This difference between the conscious and voluntary and the unconscious and involuntary way in which mental results are accomplished also gives us two types of conversion. In the voluntary type the change is usually a gradual building up of a new set of moral and spiritual habits, although even here there seem to be critical points where the movement forward is more rapid. "Our education in any practical accomplishment proceeds apparently by jerks and starts, just as the growth of our physical bodies does."⁴⁵

The more interesting type of conversion, though not radically different from the voluntary, is the involuntary or "self-surrender" type. In fact, even in the most voluntarily built-up regeneration there are stages when self-surrender is required; and in most cases the final step

⁴³Ibid., p. 168.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 169.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 169.

which brings a person to unification is one of self-surrender, not activity.⁴⁶

James again refers to Dr. Starbuck in explaining why self-surrender seems indispensable as the final stage in conversion. A person moving toward conversion has two things in mind; first of all, and most of all, he is conscious of his own wrongness or incompleteness, the "sin" he is trying to move away from. Secondly, there is also some sort of positive ideal he hopes to reach, but this is much less clear to him than the very real feelings of incompleteness he is passing through. Meanwhile "his conscious strainings are letting loose subconscious allies behind the scenes, which in their way work toward rearrangement."⁴⁷ But this rearrangement toward which these deeper forces is moving is probably quite different from what he consciously conceives. As a result, the final conversion may be interfered with by his voluntary efforts being off the mark, just as the word we try to remember seems "jammed" by our efforts to remember it. "When the new centre of personal energy has been subconsciously incubated so long as to be just ready to open into flower, 'hands off' is the only word for us, it must burst forth unaided!"⁴⁸

The self-surrender in the conversion process often takes the form of temporary apathy or exhaustion with the struggle, so that the person simply seems to give up and no longer care. This may be just the type

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 170.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 171.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 172.

of self-surrender needed for the breakthrough to come.

James here points out that psychology and religion are in agreement up to this point, "that there are forces seemingly outside of the conscious individual that bring redemption to his life."⁴⁹ Psychology refers to these as "subconscious" and not transcending the individual's personality, whereas Christian theology insists they are direct supernatural operations of God. He will return to the differences later, but it is important to notice the agreement at this point.

Next James moves on to cases of instantaneous conversion, the more dramatic type of conversion which seems to be so closely connected with divine grace. The more usual Protestant sects and the Catholic Church generally set little store by such conversions for ordinary believers, but Methodism and certain other groups take them as essential signs that salvation has been effectively received. James then raises the question, "Is an instantaneous conversion a miracle in which God is present as he is present in no change of heart less strikingly abrupt?"⁵⁰ He asks too whether those who experience instantaneous conversion are the only ones who really partake of Christ's nature while others merely seem to.

James approaches the question psychologically, beginning with the concept of "field of consciousness." He points out the growing realization that the unit of mental life is not the single, definitely outlined "idea," but more probably the total mental state, "the entire wave of consciousness or field of objects present to the thought at any time,"

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 173.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 186.

which is impossible to outline with any definiteness. "As our mental fields succeed one another, each has its centre of interest, around which the objects of which we are less and less attentively conscious fade to a margin so faint that its limits are unassignable."⁵¹ The width of these fields will vary among individuals, and within the same individual at different times. Great organizing geniuses have broader fields of vision, for example; the ordinary person at times of illness or fatigue may find his field narrowed to a point where he feels oppressed and contracted. But the important point is the indetermination of the margin. "Our whole past store of memories floats beyond this margin, ready at a touch to come in; and the entire mass of residual powers, impulses, and knowledges that constitute our empirical self stretches continuously beyond it."⁵²

This brings us to the notion of subliminal or extra-marginal consciousness.

The most important consequence of having a strongly developed ultra-marginal life of this sort is that one's ordinary fields of consciousness are liable to incursions from it of which the subject does not guess the source, and which, therefore, take for him the form of unaccountable impulses to act, or inhibitions of action, of obsessive ideas, or even of hallucinations of sight or hearing.⁵³

James feels therefore that whenever we see such phenomena, we should first of all try to determine whether "it be not an explosion, into the fields of ordinary consciousness, of ideas elaborated outside of those

⁵¹Ibid., p. 187.

⁵²Ibid., p. 187.

⁵³Ibid., p. 189.

fields in subliminal regions of the mind."⁵⁴

In applying this to instantaneous conversions, James abstracts from the question of their value for the spiritual life of the individual and considers only their psychological side. From this point of view he sees so many similarities between conversions and what is found outside of conversions that he suspects the difference between a sudden and a gradual convert to lie not in the presence of a miracle in the one and something less divine in the other, but rather in a simple psychological peculiarity,

namely, that in the recipient of the more instantaneous grace we have one of those Subjects who are in possession of a large region in which mental work can go on subliminally, and from which invasive experiences, abruptly upsetting the equilibrium of the primary consciousness, may come.⁵⁵

Seeing instantaneous conversion as a result of such an invasive experience from the subliminal region rather than as a miracle should not be objectionable, James maintains, even to people who feel such conversions to be essential. He reminds us again of the need to judge events or conditions not by their origin but by the empirical standard of their fruits for life.

If the fruits for life of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize and venerate it, even though it be a piece of natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short work with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it.⁵⁶

A study of these fruits does not indicate that a suddenly converted

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 190.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 191.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 191.

man is radically different in nature from any other man. There is no distinctive radiance that would indicate that there are two objective classes of human beings separated by a chasm. The real fruit of conversion lies in the momentousness of the fact for the individual himself and the spiritual excellence in terms of love of God and man which it leads to in his life. But that excellence can also be found in gradual converts and people who have passed through no crisis; it is not distinctive only of sudden conversion. Furthermore, Starbuck's studies have shown conversion to be a stage in ordinary spiritual growth, and Professor George Goe has discovered some evidence at least "that sudden conversion is connected with the possession of an active subliminal self."⁵⁷ But again, recognizing this psychological basis for conversion does not diminish its significance; its value is determined not by its origin but by what it accomplishes in a person's life. And conversion does seem to bring a person to a new level of spiritual vitality, so that he is born anew.

James feels, therefore, that a developed subliminal self is necessary for instantaneous conversion. But he points out that this does not necessarily exclude some kind of direct presence of the deity. It is possible that if there are higher spiritual agencies that touch us directly, it may be through our subconscious region that they do so. "The hubbub of the waking life might close a door which in the dreamy Subliminal might remain ajar or open."⁵⁸ The perception of some kind of

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 193.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 195.

external control which is an essential feature of conversion might be just that, with the external control working through our subconscious. But again, the mere fact of the control being external is not the essential point; it could be external and still be either diabolical or divine. The test of value is in the effects. He will return to this question of the higher power.

James then describes, again from personal accounts, the feelings which fill the time of the conversion experience. First is the sense of a higher control, that the conversion is not dependent upon one's own efforts. There is as well an affective experience of assurance that all is well, characterized by peace, harmony, and a willingness to be. This assurance and loss of worry seems to enable the person to perceive truths he had not known before, and to see a newness and beauty in the world he had not seen previously. The conversion experience may also involve unconsciousness, convulsions, visions, and involuntary utterances, but these do not seem to have any essential spiritual significance or lead to greater fruits for life. But most characteristic of the conversion process is the ecstasy of happiness produced in the convert.⁵⁹

Regarding the transiency or permanence of such abrupt conversions, James feels the essential point is not the duration but the fact that it shows a person the "high-water mark" of his spiritual capacity. As a matter of fact, while there are cases of backsliding, the cases of instantaneous conversion studied indicate a changed attitude toward life

⁵⁹Ibid., 195-203.

which is generally constant and permanent, with some fluctuation in ardor.⁶⁰

The process of conversion, therefore, has a psychological basis and is a particular type of the general process of unification of the divided self. Even instantaneous conversion, the type that would seem to have such a direct relation to the divine, has a psychological basis in the subliminal or subconscious region. This psychological basis is part of the rationality of the religious experience of conversion. It is a shared human experience the mind can "flow with" and "feel at home with," that does not jar the mind as unreasonable. And yet it does not destroy the value of the experience as religious. The presence of a higher power is not ruled out; such a power may indeed touch our lives through the subliminal or subconscious region. But the real test of conversion as a human as well as a religious experience is again its "fruits not its roots."

Before beginning a description of the fruits of religious life and an evaluation of them, James offers a psychological explanation for the differences in character among human beings. The diversity lies "chiefly in our differing susceptibilities of emotional excitement, and in the different impulses and inhibitions which these bring in their train."⁶¹ Our moral and practical attitude at any given time is always a resultant of two sets of forces within us, impulses pushing us one way and inhibitions holding us back. Inhibitions can be strong deterrents, but if a strong enough emotional excitement takes hold they crumble.

⁶⁰Ibid., 205-6.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 208.

This is what happens in a person who either gradually or suddenly begins to live in his religious center of personal energy and is actuated by spiritual enthusiasms. Inhibitions which once held him back no longer do, and his life after conversion takes on distinctively different characteristics.

"The collective name for the ripe fruits of religion in a character is Saintliness."⁶² There are certain features of saintliness which are universal, James says, the same in all religions. Saintliness involves, first of all, the "feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power." Secondly, saintliness is characterized by a "sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control." Thirdly, an elation and freedom result, "as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down." And fourthly, there is a shift of the emotional center towards loving and harmonious affections. These characteristics of saintliness have several practical consequences: asceticism, to the point where self-surrender may become self-immolation; strength of soul, whereby the sense of enlargement of life overcomes inhibitions and fears and new levels of patience and fortitude are reached; purity, or the cleansing from life of sensual elements and anything that would cause spiritual discord; and charity, an increase of tenderness for fellow creatures resulting from the shift of

⁶²Ibid., 215-6.

the person's emotional center.⁶³

In commenting further on charity and brotherly love, James remarks that this brotherhood of man would seem to follow logically from theism's conception of the fatherhood of God, but in fact it does not derive solely from theism. It is present in Stoicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and seems to be a characteristic affection to which our nature is liable. Its basis in human experience would seem to stem from the fact that joy, which is so much a part of the conversion experience, is an expansive affection, "and all expansive affections are self-forgetful and kindly so long as they endure."⁶⁴ Even brotherly love to the point of loving one's enemies, as it is found in saintliness, is not self-contradictory; it is "the extreme limit of a kind of magnanimity with which, in the shape of pitying tolerance of our oppressors, we are fairly familiar."⁶⁵ This important element of saintliness is not irrational; it has a basis in human experience, and if a level of emotion could be reached where enmity would no longer inhibit the friendlier interests in men, this "might conceivably transform the world."⁶⁶

James then gives examples and a further description of the transition from tenseness and self-responsibility to peace and imperturbability which results from the shift to a religious center of energy, noting again that this is accomplished most often simply by relaxing. "This

⁶³Ibid., p. 217.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 221.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 225.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 224.

abandonment of self-responsibility seems to be the fundamental act in specifically religious, as distinguished from moral practice." This seems to be a widespread and basic religious experience, "capable of entering into closest marriage with every speculative creed."⁶⁷

The purity of life characteristic of the saintly person refers to his desire for the consistency that results when all his mind's objects and occupations are ordered with reference to the spiritual excitement which is now the center of his life. He becomes very sensitive to any inner discord or inconsistency. His desire for moral consistency and purity may develop to such a degree that he finds the secular world too full of shocks and can unify his life only by withdrawing from this outer world. Just as an artist achieves harmony by dropping out whatever jars, the saintly person may avoid discord by a similar omission. Monasteries, with their "changeless order, characterized by omissions quite as much as constituted of actions," may provide a person with "that inner smoothness and cleanness which it is torture to him to feel violated at every turn by the discordancy and brutality of secular existence."⁶⁸

The next "symptom of saintliness" which James describes more fully is asceticism, which he says is an activity that can originate on different psychological levels. Asceticism can be simply an expression of "hardihood," a disgust with too much ease. The temperance it involves can be the result of the love of purity described above which shuns anything sensual. Asceticism can also be the result of love, a willingness

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 229.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 234.

to make sacrifices because of the deity a person loves. The mortifications and torments can likewise result from pessimistic feelings about oneself, along with theological beliefs about expiation, so that the person feels he is escaping worse sufferings hereafter by doing penance now. In its psychopathic form asceticism may be entered upon as a kind of fixation or obsession, or, by a perversion of sensibility a person may find pleasure in what are normally pain-giving stimuli.⁶⁹

James refers then to the growing tendency in the Western world to avoid pain, especially the self-inflicted mortifications that were carried to such extremes in the past. Against this changing background "any deliberate tendency to pursue the hard and painful as such and for their own sakes might well strike one as purely abnormal."⁷⁰ And yet it is really only the extreme which is abnormal. Some people need a certain amount of austerity and discipline to add zest to their lives, or else living becomes too easy. Therefore, asceticism in itself is not abnormal.

James next offers a further description of poverty, one of the "ecclesiastically consecrated" ways of self-mortification. Here too there seems to be a paradox, as the instinct of ownership is a fundamental part of man's nature, and yet a renunciation of ownership has been an important part of saintliness in Christianity as well as Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions. The rational basis for poverty lies first of all in the long-standing distinction between men who

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 235.

have and men who are.⁷¹ There has long been an awareness that an accumulation of material goods can weigh a person down, and if his life is based on having, he is less free than he would be if the emphasis were on doing or being. Poverty in its religious form moves beyond this "athletic attitude" to something related to the fundamental mystery of religious experience, "the satisfaction found in absolute surrender to the larger power."⁷² Reliance on material goods seems to limit that surrender, and so as a person enters a new center of personal energy and submits to a higher power, a disinterest in material goods often follows as a sign that the higher power is truly the center of interest. Poverty can also stem partly from a desire for the equality of all God's creatures, a lack of interest in dignities, honors, or goods which would set a person above his fellow man.⁷³

In the next section James will attempt to judge the value of the saintliness he has described, to see if the fruits of religion can help us determine its value for human life. It will be, to parody Kant, a "Critique of Pure Saintliness."

The approach again will be empirical, not "descending upon our subject from above" with fixed definitions and dogmas, but considering the actual fruits of saintliness without any special a priori theological system, and asking whether on the whole religion is approved by its fruits. In forming this judgment, "our general philosophic prejudices,

⁷¹Ibid., p. 249.

⁷²Ibid., p. 251.

⁷³Ibid., p. 254.

our instincts, and our common sense will be our only guides."⁷⁴

To a person who would object to this empirical approach, James replies that history shows this in fact to have been how religions and deities changed. As man's insight into nature and social arrangements developed, particular characteristics of his deity also changed. Today a God who would require human sacrifices is unacceptable, while at another time such ferocity and power in a deity were respected. Historical circumstances certainly play a part in this, but man's needs also are a contributing factor. In a very real sense, men have chosen their gods because of the fruits their belief has yielded, the practical implications of the definition of their deity.

So soon as the fruits began to seem quite worthless; so soon as they conflicted with indispensable human ideals, or thwarted too extensively other values; so soon as they appeared childish, contemptible, or immoral when reflected upon, the deity⁷⁵ grew discredited, and was ere long neglected and forgotten.

In this way various religions have approved themselves, ministering to certain vital needs in man. "When they violated other needs too strongly, or when other faiths came which served the same needs better, the first religions were supplanted."⁷⁶

James's purpose here will be to "test saintliness by common sense, to use human standards to help us decide how far the religious life com-

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 256.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 258.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 259.

mends itself as an ideal kind of human activity."⁷⁷ This means considering the practical effects of religious living to determine the rationality of religious experience. As he had made clear at the beginning, his concern is genuine, first-hand religious experience, not religion in its institutional form. Through the course of history, much evil has been done in the name of religion, but first-hand religious experience cannot be blamed for the behavior of members of particular religious groups or institutions.)

But one charge religious experience would seem liable to is over-zealousness, or fanaticism. In any area, we admire a genius for his vision or his contribution, realizing that his extreme view leaves out other views; we admire him without trying to imitate his extremism. Saintliness will have its examples of such extremism too. But "excess, in human faculties, means usually one-sidedness or want of balance; for it is hard to imagine an essential faculty too strong, if only other faculties equally strong be there to cooperate with it in action."⁷⁸ Strong faculties are no problem if they are balanced; they then result in a strong character.

In the life of saints, technically so called, the spiritual faculties are strong, but what gives the impression of extravagance proves usually on examination to be a relative deficiency of intellect. Spiritual excitement takes pathological forms whenever other interests are too few and the intellect too narrow.⁷⁹

To avoid fanaticism, both elements must be present—a sufficiently wide range of interests and an adequate intellect.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 259.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 265.

⁷⁹Ibid.

The devout love of God, one of the basic fruits of saintliness, when unbalanced becomes fanaticism, which is only "loyalty carried to a convulsive extreme." The deficiency of intellect creates an imbalance with the loyalty. "When an intensely loyal and narrow mind is once grasped by the feeling that a certain superhuman person is worthy of its exclusive devotion, one of the first things that happens is that it idealizes the devotion itself."⁸⁰ The worshipper's attention is focused on adequately realizing the merits of the deity, who cannot be praised enough. This leads to a jealousy for the deity's honor, strong enough at times in history to launch crusades and massacres, and leading at other times at least to intolerance and persecution. A greater degree of intellect with the devotion would enable the person to see that he is serving, and creating, a despotic kind of God mindful only of his own glory. The God it reveals and the narrowness it betrays rule out this fanaticism as a worthwhile fruit of the religious life.

Such fanaticism exists only in an aggressive person. In gentle characters when devotion is intense and the intellect feeble, the mind is too narrow for more than one kind of affection. "When the love of God takes possession of such a mind, it expels all human loves and human uses."⁸¹ This, James maintains, is innocent enough, but the exclusion of all practical human interests is again too one-sided to be reasonable. James coins the term "theopathic" to describe this excess of devotion. The one difficulty with this kind of devotion, as James's examples indi-

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 267.

cate, is that the person is so taken up with ecstasy for God that he is of little or no use to his neighbor, which in Christianity at least is a definite imbalance. Furthermore, people of this type who write of their experiences of God and his love for them reveal a God who could hardly be generally believed in. "Smitten as we are with the vision of social righteousness, a God indifferent to everything but adulation, and full of partiality for his individual favorites, lacks an essential element of largeness."⁸² Again, a lack of intellect creates an imbalance and keeps the devotion from being rational in James's sense.

Purity is the next saintly virtue subject to excess. When sensitivity and narrowness occur together, they require a pure and simplified world to live in. An aggressive person in this situation will find order and purity by forcibly stamping out disorder and divergence. A more retiring person will leave the disorder in the world at large and find his own order and purity by creating a smaller world. This may lead to dropping one external relation after another as interfering with his spiritual consciousness, beginning with amusements, conventional society, business, and even family. As noted earlier, this simplicity can be found by leaving the world and entering a monastery. The uniformity found in some communities, monastic and other types, which includes stereotyped costume, hours, and habits, can create the kind of simplicity and purity which some people find a need for.⁸³

This desire for purity and simplicity can be carried to an excess,

⁸²Ibid., p. 269.

⁸³Ibid., p. 272.

however, as the lives of some saints testify. But our final judgment in this area will depend on the idea of God we have and the kind of conduct we feel he is pleased with. For example, in the Catholicism of the sixteenth century it was acceptable to "leave the world to the devil whilst saving one's own soul." Today there is more of an emphasis on helping to create a better world, "and to be of some public or private use is also reckoned as a species of divine service." Purity and simplicity of life are therefore not the only values, "and it is better that a life should contract many a dirt-mark, than forfeit usefulness in its efforts to remain unspotted."⁸⁴

The difficulty with tenderness and charity, the next fruits of religion to be considered, is that they often seem unrealistic and out of place to the man of the world. Perhaps in a more perfect environment, where everyone was a saint, it might be practical to live these virtues, but in the real world "Resist not evil" and "Love your enemies" can too easily be taken advantage of.

The whole modern scientific organization of charity is a consequence of the failure of simply giving alms. The whole history of constitutional government is a commentary on the excellence of resisting evil, and when one cheek is smitten,⁸⁵ of smiting back and not turning the other cheek also.

And yet the issue is not that simple. There is a real need for the charity and tenderness of the saint, with his willingness to help a brother first and then find out if he is worthy, his readiness to trust

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 275.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 276.

and be duped many times rather than always to be suspicious. The charity of the saint is often prophetic, pointing to a time to come when such concern will hopefully be more widespread. It is likewise a real creative force, often stimulating people to become worthy of respect by treating them with respect. "One fire kindles another; and without that over-trust in human worth which they show, the rest of us would lie in spiritual stagnancy."⁸⁶ Force can destroy enemies, but by risking the first step through charity and non-resistance, the saint can sometimes change enemies to friends. Even what seems at times to be an excess of charity and tenderness can be a positive contribution to our world.

It is not difficult to see how asceticism, the next fruit of the religious life, can lead to pathological excesses. But it is important to consider the good intention of asceticism rather than the uselessness of some of its acts.

For in its spiritual meaning asceticism stands for nothing less than for the essence of the twice-born philosophy. It symbolizes . . . the belief that there is an element of real wrongness in this world, which is neither to be ignored nor evaded, but which must be squarely met and overcome by an appeal to the soul's heroic resources, and neutralized and cleansed away by suffering.⁸⁷

This much asceticism every man needs, to answer the challenge to heroism involved in facing and overcoming the evil in his life.

We have seen, therefore, that the fruits of religion, the characteristics of saintliness, can lead to excesses, sometimes harmful ones. A person must have a sufficiently wide range of interests, and the

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 277.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 281.

intellect must be able to work with the spiritual energy to maintain a balance. In all fairness it must be noted too that the narrowness in particular cases often has to do with the historical circumstances and the accepted ways of expressing spiritual energy. But on the whole, the examination of religion by practical common sense and the empirical method leaves it "in possession of its towering place in history. Economically, the saintly group of qualities is indispensable to the world's welfare."⁸⁸ We have seen earlier how a conversion to a religious center of energy can broaden a person's vision, challenge his powers, and bring him a deep peace and joy. These practical fruits for the person himself, coupled with the contributions of a genuine religious life to the world of man, form a rational basis for the religious hypothesis as it is lived with varying degrees of saintliness.

James's approach in all of this has been empirical; if the fruits of religion are good, to that extent the religious hypothesis is rational and true. But he realizes that many people would prefer to approach the question from the other direction, first establishing the objective truth of the religious hypothesis, not just its utility. If the God of religion really exists, then the things men do to meet his demands find their rational basis in the fact that God exists and makes these demands. In an attempt to address this question of the truth of religion, James will now consider mysticism, since this is a religious experience in which some people have claimed to see truth in a special way. He will later determine what religious philosophy can add to the truth of the reli-

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 290.

gious hypothesis.

Since "mysticism" and "mystical states of consciousness" are, like "religion," terms that can take on many meanings, James proposes four characteristics which will be present in an experience which he would call mystical. The first mark is ineffability. A person who has had a mystical experience cannot adequately describe it in words; it must be experienced to be appreciated. And yet, though mystical states are similar to states of feeling, they also have a noetic quality.

They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime.⁸⁹

Thirdly, mystical states are generally marked by transiency, lasting often only half an hour or so. Finally, although preliminary operations such as fixing the attention or going through certain bodily performances may facilitate the approach of the mystical state, the characteristic state of consciousness itself, once it sets in, is marked by passivity. The person feels "as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power."⁹⁰

James then gives several personal accounts of mystical experience and its methodic cultivation in certain religions. But he approaches it "in series," beginning with phenomena which are part of ordinary human experience and are the rudiments of mystical experience in its religious forms. "The simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 293.

⁹⁰Ibid.

that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one."⁹¹ It is the experience of words, statements, or even sights, sounds, or smells which we are very familiar with, suddenly taking on deeper meaning. "A more pronounced step forward on the mystical ladder is found in an extremely frequent phenomenon, that sudden feeling, namely, which sometimes sweeps over us, of having 'been here before,' as if at some indefinite past time, in just this place, with just these people, we were already saying just these things."⁹² Then too there are those moments, perhaps when walking outdoors, when everything seems to have a meaning even though it cannot be put into words. The rudiment of mysticism in these experiences would seem to be the sudden awareness that "sweeps over" a person, an awareness quite different from any purely intellectual insight.

Moving further along in the series, James says:

The next step into mystical states carries us into . . . the consciousness produced by intoxicants and anaesthetics, especially by alcohol. The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour.⁹³

These various human experiences are in a sense the rational basis for mysticism; they are types of consciousness of which mysticism is a particular religious variety. James concludes the description with several examples of religious mysticism and its cultivation.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 294.

⁹²Ibid., p. 295.

⁹³Ibid., p. 297.

The goal in this section was to determine the contribution mysticism could make toward the objective truth of the religious hypothesis, and James summarizes his findings in this area. "Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come."⁹⁴ The mystic feels that he has had a direct experience of truth, and this becomes a force that he can live by. This goes beyond strictly logical reasoning, and the vision that the mystic has had is certainly not something that someone else can argue him out of.

James's second conclusion is that no authority emanates from mystical states "which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically."⁹⁵ The enlargement, union, and emancipation characteristic of mysticism can fit with several different world views, and so the mystic cannot expect the particular world view tied to his mystical experience to be accepted uncritically by those who have not shared that experience. In fact, there can also be a "diabolical mysticism," a sort of religious mysticism "turned upside down," with many similarities to religious mysticism but moving toward pessimism and destruction. "It is evident that from the point of view of their psychological mechanism, the classic mysticism and these lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level, from that great subliminal or transmarginal region of which science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is really know."⁹⁶ The

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 323.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 324.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 326.

revelations of mysticism cannot be accepted uncritically, therefore; they must be tested by empirical methods.

Finally, James concludes that mystical states

break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.⁹⁷

Mystical states are "excitements like the emotions of love or ambition" by which facts already objectively before us "make a new connection with our active life. They do not contradict these facts as such, or deny anything that our senses have immediately seized."⁹⁸ Mystical states give a person a vision that goes beyond the partial view rendered by the facts of sense and understanding alone, and give him the excitement needed to live according to that view, all without violating the facts presented by sense and understanding.

This study of mysticism has provided an indication of its basis in ordinary human experience and the need for evaluating its fruits and revelations empirically. But the person looking for the objective truth of religion and the existence of its God would still be unsatisfied. Mysticism does not speak with that kind of authority to people outside of it. At best, the higher mystical states

point in directions to which the religious sentiments even of non-mystical men incline. They tell of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 324.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 327.

They offer us hypotheses, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset It may be that possibility and permission of this sort⁹⁹ are all that the religious consciousness requires to live on.

But many people might still feel that if God exists, then there should be something to compel belief, something that is closer to necessary truth than merely possible hypothesis. Philosophy has often claimed to prove religious truth by coercive argument, and this will be James's next area for consideration.

Can philosophy indicate whether the sense of divine presence so basic to religious experience is a sense of anything existing objectively? James begins his answer by explaining his opinion that "feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue."¹⁰⁰ If man had never felt inner unhappiness and a need of deliverance on the one hand and mystical emotion on the other, all basic religious feelings, his intellectual view of the universe probably would have led him to a better and better scientific explanation of reality, with no need to believe in any kind of deity or power beyond science and his own abilities. What came first, therefore, was the basic feeling of unhappiness and need of deliverance, and the sense of a higher power in whom that deliverance could be found; the speculative philosophical and theological formulas were then "over-beliefs, buildings-out performed by the intellect into

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 328.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 329.

directions of which feeling originally supplied the hint."¹⁰¹

Again, some would perhaps want the procedure reversed. They would like to have the existence of God proved by pure reason, in universal terms that would logically compel the intellect, and would therefore justify the religious feelings they have. Dogmatic theology and philosophy have at times pretended to do that, providing an ideal refuge for "spirits vexed by the muddiness and accidentality of the world of sensible things."¹⁰² But, James points out, theology based on pure reason has not proven universally valid; as a matter of historical fact it has not compelled the intellects of men and banished differences and sects. And it will never be able to, according to James.

I believe, in fact, that the logical reason of man operates in this field of divinity exactly as it has always operated in love, or in patriotism, or in politics, or in any other of the wider affairs of life, in which our passions or our mystical intuitions fix our beliefs beforehand. It finds arguments for our conviction, for indeed it has to find them. It amplifies and defines our faith, and dignifies it and lends it words and plausibility. It hardly ever engenders it; it cannot now secure it.¹⁰³

James does not discuss the rational arguments for the existence of God in detail. He feels that they are already weakened by their inability to convince people who do not already believe in God, as well as by Kant's criticism, and in particular by the effect of Darwinian ideas on the argument from design.¹⁰⁴ He feels that philosophy is equally unable

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 330.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 331.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 333.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 334.

to define the attributes of God. After summarizing these attributes that systematic theology has deduced, James applies to them the principle of pragmatism as elaborated by Charles Sanders Peirce. According to pragmatism, beliefs are rules for action. "If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought's practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought's significance."¹⁰⁵ There are some attributes of God deduced by dogmatic theology, such as his aseity and his lack of distinction between potentiality and actuality, which call for no differences in man's behavior, and have therefore no practical consequences. "For my own part, although I dislike to say aught that may grate upon tender associations, I must frankly confess that even though these attributes were faultlessly deduced, I cannot conceive of its being of the smallest consequence to us religiously that any one of them should be true."¹⁰⁶ There are attributes of God that do have consequences for man's behavior, but again it cannot be proved by reason alone that a God with these attributes exists. "In all sad sincerity I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experiences is absolutely hopeless."¹⁰⁷

Philosophy therefore cannot provide a rational basis for religious experience in the sense of universally valid logical proofs for the existence of the God of religion. But it can contribute to the rationality

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 339.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 340.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 346.

of religious experience in another way. We are thinking beings, and our religious and mystical experiences as well as our other experiences must be translated into thought. In particular, if we hope to exchange our feelings and experiences with others, we must use general and abstract verbal formulas. As religious experience is thus put into words, philosophy can help compare the different formulations and point out what is local and accidental to each. It can confront these religious constructions with the results of natural science and help eliminate doctrines that are scientifically absurd or incongruous.

Sifting out in this way unworthy formulations, she can leave a residuum of conceptions that at least are possible. With these she can deal as hypotheses, testing them in all the manners, whether negative or positive, by which hypotheses are ever tested.¹⁰⁸

Philosophy can perhaps point to a particular hypothesis which seems most closely verified by experience and within that hypothesis help to distinguish between "what is innocent over-belief and symbolism in the expression of it, and what is to be literally taken."¹⁰⁹ In doing this, philosophy can act as a mediator between believers, pointing out what is common and essential in religious beliefs. But this philosophizing can never be done in a vacuum, away from concrete life and personal experience. It must begin with and continually return to the religious experience which will always be larger and deeper than any verbal formulations.

In returning now to the description of religious experience, James

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 347.

will conclude with a few more characteristic elements. Against the background of the previous discussion of secondary intellectual formulations of religious experience, he notes how a person's aesthetic life plays a part in the way he chooses a religion with particular "over-beliefs." Some people prefer intellectual simplicity and purity, while others choose richness and imagery. He cites the difference between the Catholicism and Protestantism of his time as an example. He admits in fact that in the previous section he spoke "too contemptuously of the pragmatic uselessness of the famous scholastic list of attributes of the deity."¹¹⁰ For some people these attributes may add verbal richness and elegance to their religious view, even though the particular attributes may have no other practical significance for their lives.

He moves now to three elements represented in most books on religion as essential: sacrifice, confession, and prayer. Sacrifice has always been a part of religion, from burnt offerings in primitive religions to offerings of the heart and renunciations of the inner self in contemporary religions. He has already spoken of the essential place and rational basis of sacrifice as "symbolic of the sacrifices which life, whenever it is taken strenuously, calls for."¹¹¹

James sees a psychological basis and need for confession as an element of religion.

It is part of the general system of purgation and cleansing which one feels one's self in need of, in order to be in right relations to one's deity. For him who confesses,

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 348.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 351.

shams are over and realities have begun; he has exteriorized his rottenness. If he has not actually got rid of it, he at least no longer smears it over with a hypocritical show of virtue--he lives at least upon a basis of veracity.¹¹²

The basic human experience, regardless of the various religious forms confession may take, is that the shell of secrecy is opened, allowing "the pent-in abscess to burst and gain relief."¹¹³

The third essential characteristic of religion is prayer. Science would dismiss certain kinds of prayer of petition, for a change in the weather, for example. But if prayer is taken in the wider sense as meaning "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine, we can easily see that scientific criticism leaves it untouched."¹¹⁴ Prayer in this sense of a conscious relation between the person and the power upon whom he depends is essential to religion, and is in fact what distinguishes religion from ethics or humanism. It does not require any set formulas, but this prayer is realized as something active and mutual. There is a conviction that in prayer something is actually taking place between the person and his God. There have been many opinions on what is effected by prayer, but the genuineness of religion is bound up with this belief that prayer is somehow effective. "Through prayer, religion insists, things which cannot be realized in any other manner come about; energy which but for prayer would be bound is by prayer set free and operates in some part, be it objective or subjective, of the world of facts."¹¹⁵

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Ibid.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 352.

The examples that James cites show that the forms and effects of prayer have been viewed in various ways. Some people pray asking God for specific needs; for others, prayer is not tied as directly to particulars, but arises from a more general awareness of their dependence upon God. For some the effects of prayer are seen not so much in changing external circumstances and events as in opening themselves to changes within, so that as fear and egoism fall away through their conversation with God, they see the world in a new light and can live with renewed energy. "We meet a new world when we meet the old world in the spirit which this kind of prayer infuses."¹¹⁶ But the fundamental point in all forms of prayer is that "spiritual energy, which otherwise would slumber, does become active, and spiritual work of some kind is effected really."¹¹⁷

In drawing his conclusions based on this study of religious experience, James emphasizes again the importance of personal experience and feeling in religion. In the field of religion there is a great variety of thought and theory, but the basic feelings and actions are quite similar. The theories are secondary explanations of the deeper and broader experience of man. And the faith of the religious person is a "biological as well as a psychological condition." It is a force that men live by and that sets loose in them energies that are creative and productive for themselves and for the world. From this subjective side alone religion is vindicated in a sense by the fruits it produces.

But in addition to considering the subjective utility of religion,

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 359.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 361

James feels we should still try to determine its intellectual content and ask whether or not this content is true, to see if this inquiry can add anything to the rationality of religious experience.

With all the variations of theory and over-belief, there is a certain basic description of experience upon which all religions would agree, involving first of all an uneasiness that man feels, a sense that there is something wrong about him as he naturally stands, and secondly, a solution to this uneasiness in that he can be saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with higher powers. The first step in this experience is for the person to feel the wrongness and to be uneasy about it; in this he has already begun to move beyond it. "Along with the wrong part there is thus a better part of him, even though it may be but a most helpless germ. With which part he should identify his real being is by no means obvious at this stage."¹¹⁸ But when the stage of solution arrives, i.e., in religious terms when he achieves salvation, he chooses to identify his real being with the higher part of himself, which still may seem germinal.

He becomes conscious that this higher part [of himself] is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself¹¹⁹ when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.

This general description includes the various experiences James had mentioned and explained in detail: the feeling of a divided self and the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 383.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 384.

consequent struggle; the change of the personal center of energy; the surrender of the lower self in a kind of letting go; the feeling that one is being helped by an external power and united with it; and the feelings of security and joy that result.

Regarding this summary of religious experience, James continues:

The part of the content concerning which the question of truth most pertinently arises is that 'MORE of the same quality' with which our own higher self appears in the experience to come into harmonious working relation. Is such a 'more' merely our own notion, or does it really exist? If so, in what shape does it exist? Does it act, as well as exist? And in what form should we conceive of that 'union' with it of which religious geniuses are so convinced?¹²⁰

James approaches the formulation of his response through the psychological area of the subconscious self. We have already seen how, even apart from religious considerations, there is much more to our lives than we are aware of or experience at any given time. The study of religious experiences such as conversion, mysticism, and prayer has shown how invasions from the subliminal or transmarginal region, the "fringes" of experience, can be a part of religious life. James's hypothesis then is that "whatever it may be on its farther side, the 'more' with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its hither side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life."¹²¹ This approach, he feels, provides a point of contact with psychology and science by describing this side of religious experience in terms they would accept, while remaining true to the experience of

¹²⁰ Ibid., 384-5.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 386.

an external control. But describing this side of the "more" just barely opens the door. It is regarding the other side that various over-beliefs are formed.

James then states his own hypothesis or over-belief regarding the farther side of the "more" which comes in contact with a person through his subconscious region. "The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely 'understandable' world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose."¹²² God is the name used by Christians for this higher part of the universe. And it is in the phenomenon of "prayerful communion" that God produces real effects upon us. Through prayerful communion

work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal.¹²³

In other words, "God is real since he produces real effects."¹²⁴

To a person used to the elaborate arguments for the existence of God and their detailed results, James's conclusion may seem meager indeed. He does not in fact feel that his study of religious experience can even go so far as to say that God is infinite, only that he is a higher power in contact with us and friendly to us. But this is a belief he can act upon and that gives meaning to his life.

¹²²Ibid., p. 389.

¹²³Ibid., p. 389.

¹²⁴Ibid.

We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled. The universe, at those parts of it which our personal being constitutes, takes a turn genuinely for the worse or for the better in proportion as each one of us fulfills or evades God's demands.¹²⁵

The rational basis for religious experience in William James does not lie, therefore, in theoretical reason alone; it is not a universally valid logical proof for the existence of God. Rational for him includes the practical reason as well as the theoretical. In response to inner needs, it is rational to go beyond scientific evidence while remaining true to it, because there is so much more to a man's life than what science can capture. In fact, if a person is to find meaning, going beyond scientific evidence is a basic need.

Religious belief, as a particular way of going beyond the evidence, answers this need in a manner that is uniquely suited to the basic structure of man. Whether through the religion of healthy-mindedness, or for the twice-born person through a process of conversion, a man is put in touch with a higher power and finds within himself a new center of spiritual energy. This contact with a higher power meets man's basic needs and challenges his powers in a way that other world views cannot. Natural religion, scepticism, materialism, and purely humanistic ethics all fall short and leave a person with the feeling that the world is irrational, as James has argued above. The world view of theism which answers the basic needs of man has roots in his ordinary experience; religious experiences are first of all human experiences, of the same type as those common to all men. This shared experience is likewise a rational basis, since the structure of religious experience is therefore

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 389.

familiar and does not jar a person's sentiment of rationality.

The religious hypothesis further commends itself as reasonable by its fruits for the world in the beneficial effects it produces through the energy of the saintly person. Especially his tenderness and charity are prophetic of a more ideal age of man, and can often be creative of that ideal. But a person must have a sufficiently wide range of interests, and his intellect must be capable of avoiding harmful fanaticism in practice, just as it must criticize deficiencies in theory.

In addition to these subjective indications of its rationality, from its basis in common experience the religious hypothesis at least points to the actual existence of a higher power, actual because this power seems to work real effects in a person through prayerful communion. This is far from a universally valid logical proof, and yet it does not contradict scientific evidence. According to James's over-belief, this higher power would work its effects through the subconscious region. His view thus is faithful to psychological evidence, going beyond psychology without going against it.

Given man's situation, existing in a world much larger than any part he can put into words at a given time, this limited amount of objective evidence for religion may be all he can hope for. For William James the religious hypothesis was rational enough to live by, and in fact to call forth a creative and meaningful life in the world. He would ask no more from any theory.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Rev. James M. Bergin, S.V.D., has been read and approved by members of the Department of Philosophy.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis, and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

May 21, 1973

Date

Robert Barry

Signature of Advisor